FIVE COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

SEPTEMBER

15¢

STAR WESTERN

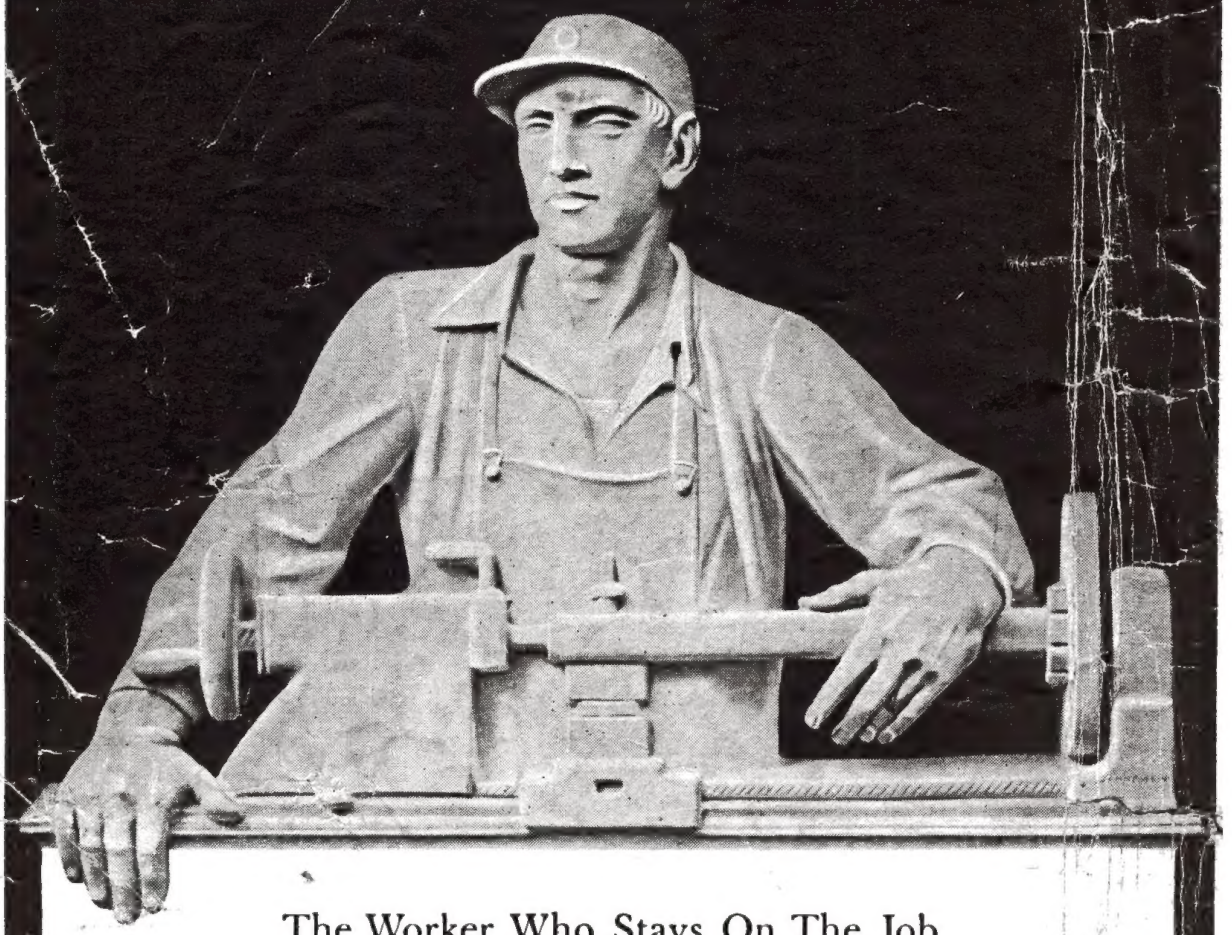
A POPULAR PUBLICATION

KILLER BOYLE
THIRSTY JOE
LIGHTNING KID

THE BUSTING OF THE BEAR PAW POOL
by WALT COBURN

HOSS GREER DIGS HIS GRAVE!
by HARRY F. OLMSTED

CALVERT SALUTES A CLEAR-HEADED AMERICAN



The Worker Who Stays On The Job

He knows that minutes count.
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But precious more
To those who fight, and bleed, and die.

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He stays. Day upon day, he stays
and meets the test...
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of honored duty well performed.
He is a Clear-Headed American.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

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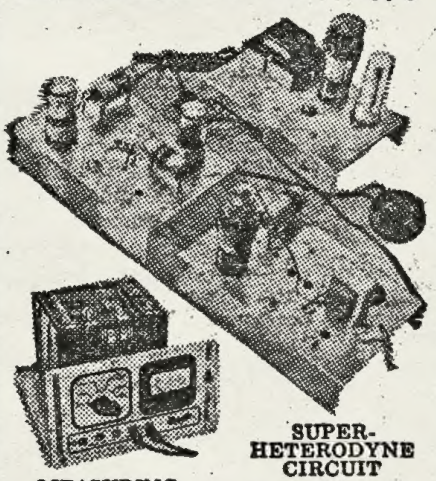

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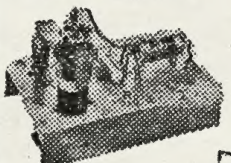

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FIVE SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-THREE SEPTEMBER, 1944 NUMBER FOUR

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Five Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE BUSTING OF THE BEAR PAW POOL.....*WALT COBURN* **10**
Like a sinister rangeland spider, the crafty Hunt Huntoon carefully spun his web of hate and death, until only a landless cowman, a stove-up, broken oldster, and a defenseless ranch-girl stood between him and the destruction of a rich and peace-loving cattle empire!

THE PISTOL-PROPHET HITS TWO-MILE...*NELSON W. BAKER* **22**
Two-Mile City's gun-bosses figured Preacher Sand's prodigal would be a psalm-singing fool they could gun-dance out of town, as they had his father—but Rawlin Sands was damned if he'd either be scared out, run out, or be shot out of that battle-scarred range!

HOSS GREER DIGS HIS GRAVE!.....*HARRY F. OLMSTED* **40**
Caught in a sure-fire murder-trap, Hoss Greer's next home would be a lonely, three-by-six grave—unless he was willing to sign the death-warrant of a game, fighting young puncher whose life he loved better than his own!

NO LAW WEST OF FUNERAL BEND.....*TOM ROAN* **60**
The only chance for that desperate wagon-train to reach Fort Cheyenne lay in Race Jackson's ability to fight off Indians, plague and drought—plus a crew of stiff-necked mutineers who hated him worse than the Sioux!

A GUN-GHOST'S REBELS FIGHT IN HELL!.....*L. ERNENWEIN* **76**
Because he had sworn one grave-side oath, Jim Fayette must break another—and bring once more to life the long-buried Rio gunman, Fanner Fayette!

★ A Star Short Story ★

YOU CAN'T RIDE HOME AGAIN.....*BOB OBETS* **52**
A hangnoose waited for Boone Reagan in San Blas—and perhaps, by filling it, he could keep another friendless youngster from following his tragic, twisted trail.

★ ★ Star Features ★ ★

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* **6**
Colorful, intimate sidelights on the old West.

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* **8**
On the Western frontier, or in the world of tomorrow, free men must fight together!

OCTOBER ISSUE OUT SEPTEMBER 8TH!

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★ The Branding Corral ★

Conducted by Strawboss

ANY institution, it is said, is influenced by the men who make it, and we believe that saying applies to the cattle industry. For that reason, we hope to run often in this department a few colorful, intimate sidelights on the great figures of Cattle-land during its dramatic, history-making period. You'll find the first one below—and if you know other human anecdotes about these immortal frontier characters—from horse-wrangler to the Big Boss—we'll be glad to see them.

Nor does that hold only for cowmen, because we'll be grateful to hear about any of the men who helped to build the West.

Shang Pierce's Educated Cows

Shanghai Pierce was one of the great figures of the old days of Cattle-land. A short time ago, we ran a mention of him from a letter we received, telling a little about him. Now W. Howland, of Chicago, writes in to tell us a little more.

Dear Strawboss:

Your mention of that old Texas longhorn, Shang Pierce, reminds me of a story I once heard. As you know, Shang was a hard man to shave, as they say; that is he was very difficult to get the best of in a deal. Here's a story that my uncle regaled me with more than once, even though it was at my uncle's expense:

In the Seventies, my uncle was a storekeeper in Kansas. When cattle prices were booming and there seemed to be no limit to the money you could make in buying stock, my uncle, along with thousands of other folks, was bitten with the cattle-fever. He negotiated with Pierce to purchase about three hundred head of cattle, and take them up from Texas to sell. He got about five youngsters—all of them greenhorns like himself—to help drive them back

The deal was made. But old Pierce, a fine figure of a man, with a voice that could be heard from here into the next county, warned my uncle that those steers were not Kansas broke and would not make a good trail herd.

Since my uncle felt he could handle anything with horns, because he ran a small herd of short-horns back home, Unk allowed that he and his boys could make the drive, all right.

Well, you heard of how cattle stampede. They usually wait till it's some stormy night, or something scares them. But not this old Texas herd. Come broad forenoon the next day, about twenty miles from where they picked those old longhorns up, the herd decided to go from there.

They wanted to run. When Unk's boys tried to bring them back, the longhorns just lit out in all directions. Those poor Kansas farmers did their best to gather them, but they weren't used to trail-driving. They spilled about two-thirds of them. And before they got half way home, the rest of the cattle had gone.

Unk had talked so much about being a stockman, and had visited so much with the boys who had come up the trail that he sort of thought he was a real trail-driver, he afterward admitted.

He never did get those cows back, but he did get a letter from old Shang Pierce. As I recall, it went something like this.

I am holding three hundred head of cattle that have my brand vented and are trail-branded the 1-3, whatever that is. You are welcome to come and get them again, but I warn you that this bunch is pretty unmanageble, and likely can't be drove unless a Texan does same. I have sold this same bunch of cattle before, and likely will again. If they find their way back home, I can't help it.

Shanghai Pierce.

After that, my uncle stuck to his storekeeping, back in Kansas. But he never bought any Texans free drinks.

Thank you Mr. Howland. But we'll be willing to bet that the genial, roaring Shang Pierce bought your uncle a couple of drinks, even if he didn't make up for the cattle.

Range Song

And a question from Mat Matthews, of Houston:

Dear Strawboss:

Does anyone know the rest of the poem, a fragmant of which I quote herewith? Or does anyone know who wrote it?

Bacon that sizzles and crisps in the pan
After the round-up smells good to a man.
Tales of the cowman and rustler retold
Over the pipes, as the embers grow cold
Those are the tunes that memories play.
Make me a puncher again for a day. . . .

Anyone know that one? Let us hear if you do.

Hasta luego!

—STRAWBOSS

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—Wm. Ashbrook, Colo.

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—S. Walek, Mass.

H. C. Lewis

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Dept. 64-76, Chicago 12, Ill.

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★ UP THE TRAIL ★

BOB BARTLETT, marshal of Lone Dog, Wyoming, was dangerously ill from a gunshot wound, and the nearest doctor was in Cheyenne, over a hundred miles away. Doc Keller, of Lone Dog, had died that week of dysentery. Bartlett's case was desperate, for Lone Dog was a mining town and all the available wagons were in use far up in the hills.

A more "civilized" community might have thrown up its hands then and there, perhaps offered up a prayer that Providence would spare Bartlett from certain death. But Lone Dog knew and loved its marshal well, and they were determined that if it were humanly possible to do anything for him, that thing would be done.

Accordingly, a group of citizens approached Happy Kyle, the wheelwright. "Way Bob looks," they told him, "he won't live more'n another day if we don't git him to a sawbones." Happy stared at them incredulously, declaring that it was impossible for him or anyone else to put any kind of a wagon together in time to get the marshal to Cheyenne within twenty-four hours. But he agreed to do it, just the same.

In the back of his shop were three discarded wagon wheels, plus shattered rims and spokes from several others. Grimly, Kyle set to work to mend the three warped wheels and to fabricate a fourth from the discarded pieces. Meanwhile Joe Meers, the carpenter, volunteered to build a box that would serve as a wagon body, and big Cliff Jones, the local blacksmith, forged axles. Ten hours later, by the time mules and harness—precious as gold in Lone Dog—had been rounded up, the work was done. The wagon was crude and awkward, but it would serve—if only it held out on the long trip to Cheyenne.

The marshal's unconscious body was loaded tenderly into the wagon bed, and Ed Murray, the town's ace driver, whipped up the mules and started off. With him was Phil Hunter as gun-guard, for the territory between Lone Dog and Cheyenne was infested with renegade bands, and Bartlett had many enemies among the lawless.

All went well until they reached the most dangerous part of the road—a mountain trail that wound precariously along the side of a sheer cliff. Halfway along the mountainside, Murray looked back and saw a band of riders coming hell-for-leather after them. In the lead, recognizable by his great blond beard, was Ace Turner, the outlaw leader who had sworn to wear Bartlett's ears. If the outlaws caught up and recognized the marshal, he was a dead man.

Murray whipped the team to a frenzied gallop, while Hunter held off the pursuers as best he could. But when they reached the end of the mountain trail, miraculously unhurt, and started down the long slope into the plains, the renegades were gaining.

"Only one thing t'do," Hunter gasped. "Head for Ole Swanson's place. He ain't got no love fer miners, but he'll help us now. He's got to!"

Bullets were singing perilously close about their ears when they reached the cut-off trail that led to Ole Swanson's ranch house. Luckily for them, Ole himself and two of his riders were riding toward the Cheyenne road, and the two parties met while the owlhooters were still a few hundred yards behind. Without stopping to parley, Ole and his men added their guns to Hunter's, and held off the raiders until they reached the ranch house. For two long hours the ranch men and the miners stood off Turner's gang—who, ignorant of the miners' desperate errand, thought the wagon contained refined metal from the Lone Dog diggings. At last, after three of the outlaws had been killed, the rest gave up the siege and rode off.

Hunter and Murray thanked the rancher for his aid—cementing a friendship that was to last the rest of their lives—and continued their journey. The rest was a race against time, but they reached a Cheyenne doctor in time to save the marshal's life.

Those frontier men knew then, even if they had never realized it consciously before, that no one man is strong enough to stand alone against the world. It was a lesson that the West taught well—and one that is more valuable today than ever.

Applied on a broader scale, it means that no nation can isolate itself from the rest of the world, any more than an individual. We have learned that in costly terms, in the blood of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Holland, China, the Philippines. . . . But it is an easy thing to forget once peace comes, nevertheless, and we must never forget it. It's up to us to see to it that this simple truth—that man is a social animal and cannot exist cut off from his fellow human beings—shall never have to be learned again, in blood, tragedy, and the lives of good men, on the pages of tomorrow's history.

—The Editor

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THE BUSTING OF THE BEAR PAW POOL

CHAPTER ONE

War at the White Elephant

LOGAN BURRELL, and Uncle Clem Ferguson and some cowpunchers from the Bear Paw Pool outfit, were in the White Elephant rolling poker dice for the drinks when Cliff Curnett swaggered in with a stranger. Cliff had that half-sneering grin on his thin-lipped mouth that always gave him away when he had been up to one of his slick, ornery, underhanded deals and was getting away with it.

"Boys," he jingled his silver-mounted spurs as he hung a boot-heel on the brass bar rail, "meet up with my new pardner, Hunt Huntoon. Mister Huntoon," he added, "is a banker."

Curnett's Circle Cross outfit had been mort-

Novel of Warring Cowmen

By Walt Coburn

It was Jean Ferguson. Her face was white....

Small wonder that Hunt Huntoon was set to carve himself a big slice of cattle-empire.... For the only honest folks who could stand against him were a cowman without a ranch, a stove-up, broken oldster, and a desperate girl, who knew more about teaching ranch-kids the three R's than teaching range-hogs triggernometry!

gaged to the hilt, and nobody but a pilgrim and rank stranger to the cow business would have accepted a partnership in the Circle Cross as a free gift. So they all leaned forward across their drinks or into the back-bar mirror to get a better look at Cliff Curnett's sucker.

But this Hunt Huntoon did not look like any easy mark. He was tall and lean and hawk-beaked. A clipped black mustache covered his upper lip, and his lower jaw was long and lean and pointed like a killer wolf's.

"Faro banker, mebbe," chuckled Uncle Clem Ferguson, who was half-drunk as usual.

"The old son with the white whiskers," Cliff Curnett said to his new partner, "is one of them hungry neighbors I was tellin' you

about, Hunt. Never eats his own beef, and even his bulls has twins."

Huntoon's cold yellow eyes passed Uncle Clem Ferguson, flicked the Bear Paw Pool cowpunchers and dismissed them, and stared straight at Logan Burrell.

Logan stared back. For a long moment they sized each other up, and what they saw there made them enemies—without so much as a single spoken word.

Logan Burrell wasn't the man to make enemies quickly. For six-eight years now he'd ramrodded the Bear Paw Pool outfit and built up his own little spread between the Bear Paws and the Little Rockies. He was quiet-mannered and talked with a lazy drawl and he angered slowly. He stood about five feet nine in his high-heeled boots and looked even shorter because he was wide in the chest and shoulders. He was blunt-jawed and short-nosed and his mouth was wide and generous.

The last time they had met in town, there had been a free-for-all ruckus here in the White Elephant between Logan and Curnett. Logan had slapped a six-shooter out of Curnett's hand and then whipped him with his fists until Curnett had hollered enough. But he'd told Logan that when the sign was right he'd hang Logan's hide on the fence. Cliff Curnett had a habit of keeping such promises.

CLIFF looked down along the bar, his eyes following Huntoon's, and his twisted grin flattened. "That's the feller I was tellin' you about, Hunt. Owns the LB iron and a nice hunk of land below the Sandcliffs. Runs the Pool wagon. Name's Logan Burrell; and he'll bear watchin'."

The Pool cowpunchers quit grinning and shifted uneasily. Some of them cut meaning looks at Logan, to tell him that they'd keep the stranger off his back if he locked horns with Curnett. Logan interpreted the looks, grinned a little and shook his head. He wanted no trouble with Curnett or Huntoon or any other man right now. He and Uncle Clem Ferguson had ridden to Chinook to make a dicker with the bank for an extension on the mortgages on their outfits. They'd stopped in here on their way to the bank because Uncle Clem needed a couple or three stiff drinks, "to steady my nerves, Loggie."

So if Cliff Curnett was getting on one of his ugly jags, Logan figured, the wise thing for him to do was to get Uncle Clem out of here and on down the street to the bank before it closed for the day. They were shaved and clean and there was no use getting all messed up in a saloon ruckus. Logan took hold of the little old cowman's arm. Uncle Clem shook off his hand. There were times when Uncle Clem got mule-headed

"I seen that Huntoon feller before, Loggie. Mebbeso it'll come to me after one more shot of forty rod." Uncle Clem reached for the bar bottle.

Huntoon's flat lips pulled back, and he showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. His yellow-gray eyes still watched Logan Burrell.

"Don't strain a gut tryin' to think, old-timer," he said. He had a queer voice—dropping each word separately, like dealing cards face down, one at a time.

"Swallow your medicine, Uncle Clem, and come along." Logan Burrell's voice was sharp-edged.

"You're the boss, Loggie." The grizzled cowman downed his drink. He'd caught the urgency in the younger man's voice and took it for a warning.

The Bear Paw Pool men looked their disappointment, but said nothing.

"You ain't had a drink with my new pardner," said Cliff Curnett.

"No." Logan Burrell was on his way towards the swinging half-doors.

"Let him go, Cliff," said Huntoon. "There's always another day."

When Logan and Uncle Clem had gone, Cliff Curnett told the Pool men to drink up and have one on him. "That wagon boss of yourn backs down when he hasn't got all the bulge," he said.

The four Pool men looked at one another, then walked out of the saloon. None of them had spoken to Cliff Curnett. Not a man, not even the saloonkeeper behind his bar, had acknowledged Cliff's swaggering introduction of his new partner.

CLIFF CURNETT'S muddy complexion reddened dully. He shoved the bar-bottle back towards the saloonman.

"Keep that rotgut for your sheepherder trade, Irish. Me'n Mister Huntoon is drinkin' bonded stuff."

The big red-faced saloonman took a small ledger from the back bar and flipped it open. "I got you down on my book fer one hunderd and eighty-seven bucks, Curnett. Till ye lay the cash on the bar to cover that, ye'll drink outa the bar-bottle. And be damned grateful fer that. Them's cash customers ye just run outa my place. One drink on the cuff fer you and yer *Mister* Huntoon."

Then Pat Irish looked square into Hunt Huntoon's yellow-gray eyes and grinned. It wasn't a friendly grin. "I thought you was still doin' time fer manslaughter, Hunter."

Huntoon took a thick roll of currency from his pocket and counted one hundred and eighty-seven dollars across the bar. Then he slapped down a twenty-dollar bill alongside the other money.

"Clean your book, Irish. Then break the

seal on a bottle of your best rye. And you got the wrong dope on me. They gave me a leather medal for killin' that short sport at Butte. You never get out of that whisky fog, do you, Irish?"

Pat Irish's blue eyes glinted dangerously. He jerked a big thumb at a sign on the back bar. It read: "INJUN LIST," and below it were half a dozen or more names in bold black printing.

"Them's the names of men who couldn't buy a drink in my place if they had all the money in Montana. Be damned careful with the loose talk, or the name of Hunter goes on it. *Mister Huntoon* is it, now? Well Hunter er Huntoon, it fits the same tinhorn. . . . And there's the bar-bottle ye'll drink from or go without."

Pat Irish pocketed the hundred and eighty-seven dollars and marked Cliff Curnett's debt *Paid* on the little ledger.

Huntoon's yellow eyes narrowed to murderous slits, and his left hand had slid inside his coat towards the gun in its armpit holster. Big Pat Irish stood flat-footed, defiant, unafraid. Then a big rawboned man with graying red hair and drooping mustache came in through the swinging half-doors of the White Elephant. There was a sheriff's badge pinned to his unbuttoned vest.

Cliff Curnett nudged Huntoon. "It's Johnny Law, Hunt. Take it easy."

Huntoon's hand slid away from the pearl-handled six-shooter in its concealed holster. Pat Irish grinned at the big law officer.

"Saint Michael himself couldn't walk in more welcome," said the big saloonkeeper. "The top av the mornin' to ye, Tom!"

Sheriff Tom Rankin grinned easily. His shrewd, humorous eyes took in Cliff Curnett and the stranger. He nodded curtly to Cliff, and eyed Huntoon as he might look over a horse that wore a strange brand.

"Howdy, Tom," Cliff Curnett forced some heartiness into the greeting. "Just in time to drink with my new partner. Shake hands with Hunt Huntoon. Hunt, the badge-polisher is Sheriff Tom Rankin."

The sheriff ignored Huntoon's proffered hand. He walked past and down to the far end of the long bar. Pat Irish followed him on the other side, and they stood there beyond earshot.

"I was passin' along, Pat," said the sheriff in a low tone. "Just happened to look in the window, and didn't like what I saw. What seems to be the defucalty?"

"I never was the man, Tom, to holler fer help." He put a bottle and glasses on the bar and winked, then walked back to his two customers.

Cliff Curnett and Hunt Huntoon had filled their glasses from the bar-bottle. They downed their drinks, and Pat Irish shoved the twenty-dollar bill back across the bar. "That one," he said, "was on the house." He took away the bottle.

Then Pat Irish reached out a big ham-like hand and picked up the two whisky glasses they had used. He deliberately smashed both glasses in a large brass cuspidor he kept behind his bar. With a stubby black pencil, he printed the name HUNTER on his Injun List.

"Good day to ye both," said the big man. "There's the Bucket of Blood down the street. Take yer trade there."

Cliff Curnett's fists knotted. "Why you big whisky-soaked shanty Irish—"

"Remember the Johnny Law, Cliff," Huntoon spoke in his queer voice. "It's a cold deck. Let's get some air."

WHEN they had gone, the sheriff eyed the big saloonman who now broke the seal on a bottle of fifteen-year-old bonded whisky.

"To take the taste av that scut out me mouth, Tom," he explained. "He's a high-stake gamblin' man, a high roller. Huntoon, he calls hisself now—but his real name is Hunter. I've cut his trail a dozen times in the past twenty years. And it's like steppin' around a coiled rattlesnake. He's a killer, Ike, a cold-blooded killer. He cold-decked a minin' man out fifty thousand or more in Butte. And when the minin' man accused Hunter av usin' marked cards, Hunter killed 'im.

"The man he killed was an old friend av mine. Managed me when I was fightin' in the ring. Then he staked me to a saloon when I hung up me gloves. Whatever it is that Hunter's up to here, it's no good, Ike. Him and that Cliff Curnett make a shady pair. So the name av Hunter is on me Injun List. Now I'll add Curnett's name and have done with it. And if ever ye find Hunter out back with his skull caved in by a bung-starter, ye kin use yer own judgment, Tom. Now me speech is done. Drink hearty, Sheriff."

Rankin said, "I'll keep an eye on this Hunter or Huntoon, or whatever his name is. Looks like he's up to something, and he's off to a running start. He's picked up Cliff Curnett's mortgage from the bank, Pat. Not only that, he's bought up the mortgages on Logan Burrell's and Uncle Clem Ferguson's ranches, and more besides. When he commences foreclosin', he'll throw them little spreads together and it'll be one of the biggest cow-outfits in Montana. He laid the money on the barrel-head. And that's the stuff that talks, make no mistake, Pat."

Down the main street at the bank, that was just about the gist of what the banker was telling Logan Burrell and Uncle Clem Ferguson.

"The bank has to protect itself, gentlemen. There are stringent banking laws by which we

are forced to abide. My sympathy is, of course, with you cowmen. But the bank and its stockholders must be protected, regardless of personal feelings and sympathies. And to be frank with you, the bank was getting worried about some of your accounts. Mr. Huntoon bought up your paper with real money. For the first time in many months our board of directors can draw a full, deep breath—"

"And I hope yuh choke to death on it," rasped Uncle Clem Ferguson. "You knowed damn' well that we'd pay off and with plenty money left over for winter expenses, after we shipped our beef this comin' fall. But you sold us down the river, you white collared—!"

CHAPTER TWO

Chinook's Carrie Nation

LOGAN BURRELL got the irate old cowman out of the bank and headed back for the White Elephant.

"By Judas, Loggie, I'll gut-shoot that damn' Huntoon thing! Cliff Curnett's pardner, is he? By the hell, you know what Curnett will do to us now! I knowed by the look on his dirty face that he'd bin up to somethin'. . . . Judas in Hell, Loggie, you goin' to let them two sons o' snakes shove us aroun'? You're ramroddin' the Pool. All right, call a meetin'. Git us all together. I was one of the Vigilantes that hung Henry Plummer and his gang. We got shut of them dirty thieves. We kin do the same job—"

"We ain't licked yet, Uncle Clem," Logan told the white-whiskered cowman. But deep inside, he felt sick.

Logan and Uncle Clem were nearing the White Elephant. The little old cowman was voicing his war-talk in no uncertain terms when the younger man gripped his arm, halting him in his teetering stride. Uncle Clem broke off in the middle of a word and clawed for his gun. Then he remembered he was unarmed. The law had put Uncle Clem under five-hundred-dollar peace bond for shooting up the town last Fourth. And now whenever he came to Chinook he was honor and duty bound, under penalty of forfeiting the cash bond Pat Irish had put up for him, to leave his gun and cartridge-belt in the big saloonman's care until he got ready to pull out for home.

"Listen, Uncle Clem!"

The old cowman gasped. "The boys is tangled with Cliff Curnett and that Huntoon dude! Lemme the loan of your smoke-pole, Loggie!"

From inside the White Elephant came the sounds of smashing glasses and bottles. A heavy barroom chair or a poker table upset with a dull, heavy crash.

Logan reached for his gun and headed for the saloon with long strides. Uncle Clem trotted at his side, cussing with vitriolic fury. They were almost knocked down as the short half-doors swung open and a large, buxom lady with red-apple cheeks and silvery hair came out with all the majesty of a dreadnaught plowing through a rough sea.

UNCLE CLEM tried to dodge behind Logan Burrell, but his high boot-heels were not meant for fast footwork. Without breaking her stride, the irate woman collared him.

"Boozin' away the hard earnings of your only child!" Uncle Clem's good wife had a full, hearty voice. "Dodgin' out the back door, thinkin' to fool me by prancin' down the street as bold as a band-leader and hidin' behind the legs of him that covers you with smooth lies and excuses and packin' a flask of the vile stuff on the sly. Shame on you, Logan Burrell. And as for you, my little man—"

"Do somethin', Loggie!" Uncle Clem quavered. "The woman's locoed! Packin' a tommyhawk and it's drippin' blood. She's murdered Pat Irish. She'll split my skull! Grab 'er, Loggie!"

Biddy Ferguson was wielding a bright red hatchet. On its blade and handle was stamped in silvery lettering: CARRIE NATION.

A crowd was gathering. Men, women and children were spewing out of the Mercantile and Post Office and the bank, and some of the Bear Paw Pool cowhands came out of the barber shop and restaurant. The banker's son who was courting Uncle Clem's daughter Jean, came trotting out of the bank behind his granite-faced father. From the hotel bar came Cliff Curnett and Hunt Huntoon. And then Pat Irish and Sheriff Tom Rankin came out from behind the bar where they had taken refuge from the barrage of flying bottles and glasses and smashed furniture.

"And that," said Banker Ben Stearns to his tailored cashier son Herbert, "is your future mother-in-law—unless you come to your senses."

"Hooray fer Carrie Nation!" some wag shouted loudly.

Pat Irish mopped cold sweat from his red face. "Git your missus outa town, Clem Ferguson, before she busts them plate-glass winders. Ye're on the Injun List.

"There's Dutch John's and there's the Last Chance and there's the Green Front and the Bucket av Blood. Now will ye tell me why the woman had to pick the only decent place in town to wreck with her damned Carrie Nation hatchet? Ye're the Law, Tom Rankin. Disarm the woman. Jail 'er!"

"Get your horse, you little boozer!" Biddy Ferguson gave her husband a hard shove that sent him teetering along the wide plank sidewalk. "Get home where you belong." She

headed for her buckboard where she'd tied her team at the Mercantile hitchrack.

Just then Jean Ferguson rode into town from her little red school. It was too late to turn back when she saw the cause of the commotion. She kept her chin up and her chestnut-brown head held high, but her dark eyes were starry with sudden tears.

IT TOOK all the courage Jean Ferguson could summon up out of a shame-filled heart to keep on coming, pretending not to notice when Banker Ben Stearns shoved his Herbert back into the bank. She'd gotten her schoolteacher job through the influence of the saloonkeeper, Pat Irish—whose money had built the schoolhouse so that his fast-growing youngsters would get an education. And now this.

There were too many now watching the show who were forgetting that Biddy Ferguson, born Bridget Malone, had fed hungry men, women and children free when she ran the only eating place in town. Or that she had worked night and day helping the worn-out cow-country doctor fight epidemics of smallpox and diptheria, or that when death struck, Biddy had been the first one there with warm-hearted consolation. Many of them were forgetting all that now as they grinned and snickered, watching the spectacle . . . not choosing to remember how young Pete Ferguson, Biddy's only son, had been shot and killed in a drunken saloon brawl in the White Elephant. Doc Steel had said that the shock of her only son's death had been too much for the woman.

Jean Ferguson spurred her horse through the crowd that was gathered in the street. Those who were slow in getting out of her way felt the sharp, ripping bite of the little schoolmarm's rawhide quirt.

"Why you damned little—!" The man who had been reluctant about letting her pass wiped blood from his quirt-lashed mouth and lifted his voice.

He never finished what he had to say. Logan Burrell hit him and he dropped in the heavy dust of the street like a shot beef. Then Logan was alongside the buckboard, helping Biddy Ferguson up over the wheel and onto the seat.

"Yes, ma'am," he was telling her, "it was my fault, Aunt Bridget. I shoulda kept Uncle Clem outa town, but we had them papers at the bank to sign. I kept him sober as a judge," Logan lied fast, "and we got the papers all signed. Now you better let me drive this team. The crowd's got 'em kinda spooked and they're fixin' to run away. Jean kin lead my horse along behind. The round-up's camped down the river and my cook's on one of his drunks.

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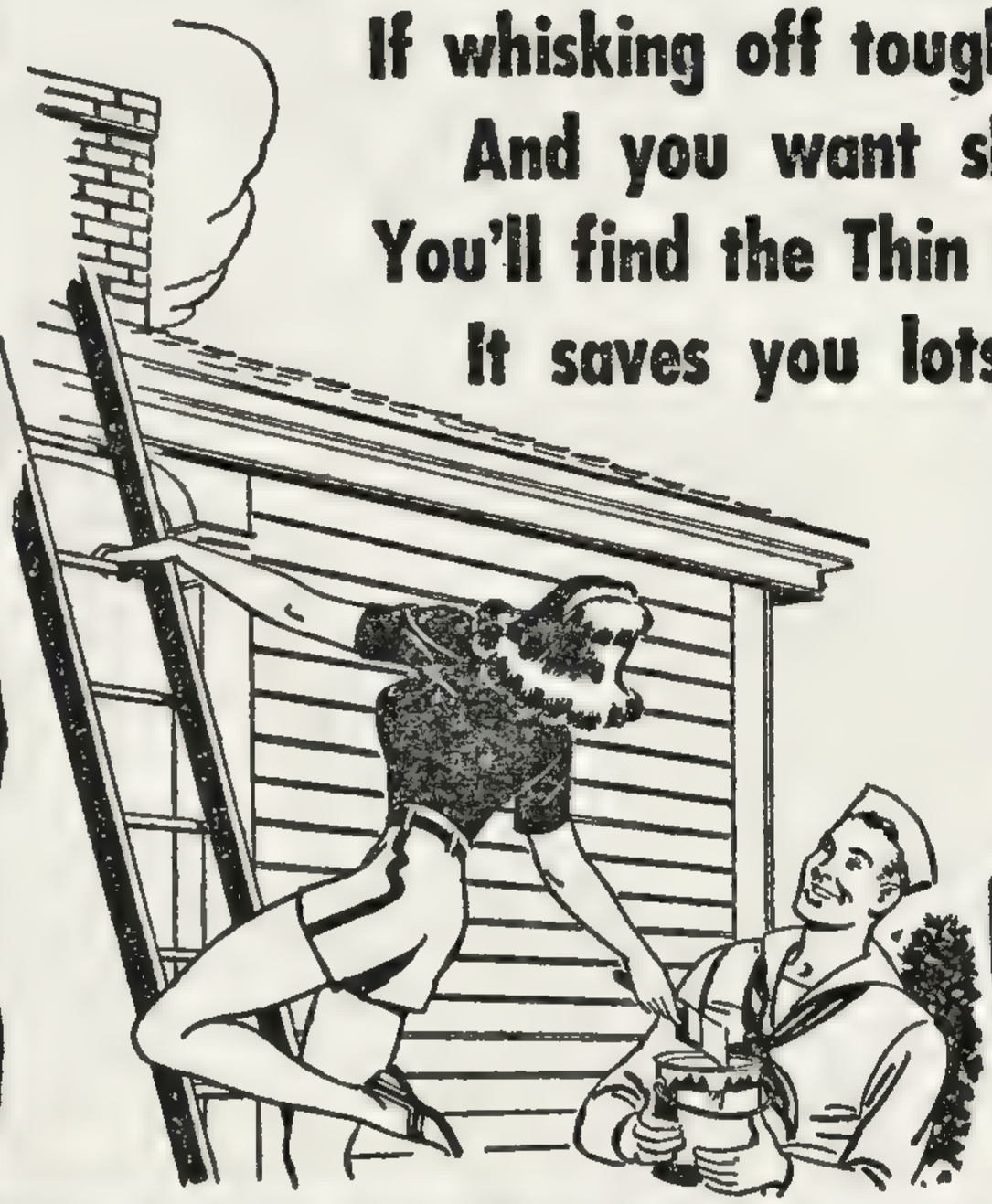

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Why don't you stop at the wagon long enough to sling the boys a decent meal?"

Logan climbed up onto the seat and took the lines. Jean untied the team as he kicked off the brake, and the crowd broke and crowded one another getting out of the way. Now tears were wetting the woman's apple cheeks and sobs shook her heavily. She gripped the bright red hatchet in toil-reddened hands.

"Now, now, Aunt Bridget," Logan Burrell had to lift his voice to make himself heard above the rattle of buckboard wheels. "Don't take on like that—"

Jean caught up with them, leaned from her saddle and reached out a gloved hand to pat her mother's tear-stained cheek. The girl's face had lost its usual red-tan coloring. Jean looked white and tired. This was the last week of school: examinations . . . the youngsters restless and unruly, with vacation a few days off . . . examination papers to correct at night . . . Ben Stearns trying in his own quiet, cold-blooded way to get her dismissed because Herbert was acting the fool. And this was the final straw.

Logan Burrell sensed it all as he watched from under the slanted brim of his hat.

"There's always a job somewheres," he grinned up at her, "herdin' sheep."

"Won't they let us join the Wild Bunch?" She blinked hard and forced a smile.

Biddy Ferguson gripped her red hatchet and sobbed quietly. Best to let her alone, Logan decided. She'd be all right after a bit. They'd seen her break down like this before. But the Carrie Nation hatchet business was a new one.

"Mebbe. We'd stick up the bank and head down the Outlaw Trail. Mebbeso Herbie would throw in with us. Do him good to cut loose from Stone-Hearted Ben."

"Herb's all right. He just needs a little fixing. . . ."

Logan Burrell wasn't listening. Something in the sound of Biddy Ferguson's sobbing had caught his attention. Her breathing was short, her cheeks mottled, and her eyes looked glassy. He put his arm across her shoulders and handled the lines with his other hand.

"Get Doc Steel over to Pat Irish's house, Jean. . . . Looks like Aunt Bridget's goin' to have a sunstroke."

He headed for the saloonman's house at the edge of town. By the time Logan had Biddy Ferguson's two-hundred-pound bulk lifted from the buckboard, Pat Irish's wife had the front door wide open and the kids shooed aside and the covers of the big bed in the spare room laid back.

Then Jean got there with Doc Steel and they got the stricken, now unconscious woman undressed and into bed. After a while Uncle Clem showed up, scared and sick-looking. Logan led him into the sitting room, gave him a stiff drink of straight rye and told him to take it easy. And then Pat Irish came, muttering a half-forgotten prayer.

Out by the buckboard the bright-red Carrie Nation hatchet lay in the dust.

CLEM FERGUSON'S wife died before morning of the next day. Once during the night she opened her eyes, smiled and spoke to them. She thought she was in her own bed at the ranch. She held Clem's hand and called him the pet names she'd made for him when they were young and she had been the prettiest girl in that part of Montana's frontier cow-country.

She smiled and stroked Jean's bright hair. She told Logan Burrell that he'd die a lonely bachelor if he didn't get up the gumption to ask Jean the question she'd be gettin' tired waitin' for him to pop.

It was the largest funeral ever held at the little cow-town. Those who had laughed at the red hatchet now sobbed the loudest. The Chinese who now owned the eating place had a huge wreath sent from Helena. There were Indians who came with their whole families over long wagon roads. There was a basket of red roses from the women at the honkytonk, and flowers from the Governor of Montana—she had trusted him for a meal when he was a prospector, hunting for placer gold.

Sheriff Tom Rankin never seemed to recognize the several outlaws who rode up out of the badlands south of the Little Rockies, to pay their final respects to the woman who had fed them, refused their money and asked not a question. Banker Ben Stearns was at the funeral with his son Herbert. But Cliff Curnett and Hunt Huntoon were noticed only because they were not there.

Uncle Clem Ferguson was the hardest hit; he would have sworn off drinking entirely. But Jean poured him a drink and told him that nobody had been to blame—nobody but the man who had shot and killed young Pete that night.

And that man, Sheriff Tom Rankin and Pat Irish and Logan Burrell were agreed, could have been Cliff Curnett. There was no proof. It had been a hell of a ruckus and the White Elephant a shambles and everybody into it in the dark. Whoever had killed Pete had picked his man with cunning and emptied his gun into him. But there was no way at all of ever proving it.

Jean Ferguson beat Banker Ben Stearns to it. She turned in her written resignation the day school let out for the summer vacation.

"I'm going out to the ranch," she told Herb Stearns, "to look after my father. Uncle Clem needs me."

But it didn't look like Uncle Clem Ferguson was going to need Jean to keep house for him there at the Haystack Butte ranch. Cliff Cur-

nett, wearing a special deputy's badge, had fetched Uncle Clem to town, charging him with butchering a Circle Cross beef.

Uncle Clem was in the Chinook jail and being held without bail, when a Pool man fetched the bad news to Logan Burrell at his Sandcliffs ranch where he was putting up hay.

"The hell of it is, Logan, the mule-headed old rascal won't deny it. Says he's always et Circle Cross beef and he'll keep on eatin' that kind of meat as long as he's let loose. Says Cliff Curnett has stolen so many Ferguson cattle that he knows the mammy of that beef steer was one of his own F Triangle cows. And what kin you or me or the sheriff or even Miss Jean do to help out a stubborn-headed ol' cuss like that, Logan? He wants you to saw the jail bars and have him a saddle horse and a Winchester and plenty ca'tridges. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Uncle Clem Busts Out

LOGAN left the haying to his halfbreed hay crew, got out of his sweaty clothes, bathed, shaved and headed for town. He stopped at a ranch or two and told the owners, members of the Bear Paw Pool, that he was no longer ramrodding the Pool.

"I told you all at the wind-up of the calf work in June," he said, "that I was pullin' outa the Pool. I'm strictly on my own."

That was as much as he'd told them when they protested his quitting his wagon-boss job. And that was as much as they got out of Logan Burrell now. But they eyed the .30-30 carbine in his saddle scabbard and had little trouble drawing their own conclusions. Uncle Clem Ferguson was in a tight, and whoever laid a hand on that cantankerous old cuss had Loggie to whip. But Logan Burrell wasn't the man to drag the Bear Paw Pool into the ruckus.

They called Logan a damned fool for letting that ornery old Uncle Clem get him into it—and secretly admired him for siding the damned old rascal. And when he had ridden on alone, they quietly saddled their town horses and got their saddle guns.

In town, Logan found Sheriff Tom Rankin propped up in bed with a cold toddy and his right leg in a plaster cast.

"When a horse breaks a laig, Logan, they shoot 'im. Keep your hand off that gun. You want to see Uncle Clem, you have to git the jail keys from Pat Irish. He's kinda ridin' herd on the ol' rannihan."

It was only a few weeks until election time, and as he'd ridden into town Logan had seen dodgers tacked to every telegraph pole and fence post telling the voters to elect Cliff Curnett Sheriff.

"What's this 'Cliff Curnett for Sheriff?' " Logan asked Tom Rankin. "Somebody's joke?"

"If there's a joke to it, Loggie, it's on me," grinned the sheriff. "Curnett will win. This Huntoon Hunter, and that's his real name, I found out, is backin' Cliff for sheriff. He's bought the Bucket of Blood and the drinks is free there to all supporters of Cliff Curnett. Till you've tried it on, feller, you don't realize how many votes you kin buy with a jug of rotgut."

"But there's the cowmen's votes. What cowman in his right mind, drunk or sober, would vote for Curnett?"

"That's where the actually high-grade politics shows up, Loggie. Huntoon Hunter don't overlook the white chips, but he bets the reds and the big blue stack. He's bought into the bank heavy. Moved right in and taken over like he owned it. Ben Stearns takes Hunter's orders, and white-collar Herbie jumps through hoops like a circus pup. The bank holds papers on just about every cow-outfit around here. So Ben Stearns tells them cowmen how to vote and how to tell their cowpunchers to vote. Hell, they kin vote blanket Injuns from the Fort Belknap Reservation if they figger they need to. I'd be wastin' my time and forty-rod likker and five-cent seegars goin' after votes this time. I ain't got a foot to stand on."

Rankin slapped the heavy plaster cast on his leg and waved his visitor towards the bottle on the dresser. There was an easy grin on his homely face. He seemed to be taking defeat too easily, Logan thought.

"How about Pat Irish?" Logan downed his drink in hopes that the raw whisky would thaw out that cold, hard lump inside his belly.

"Pat," grinned Sheriff Tom Rankin, "has got religion."

He had Logan strengthen his cold toddy with three fingers of rye. "When the White Elephant wouldn't serve him a drink, Huntoon Hunter bought the saloon," said the sheriff flatly. "Pat Irish has gone outa the likker business. You'll find him at his house playin' with the kids."

Logan Burrell helped himself to another drink. "Now if you'd tell me that Jean had run off and married Herbie, that would just about make it complete."

"She gave pore Herbie the gate. Her Sunday smile goes to Huntoon Hunter now. Herbie's nose is outa joint bad. Jean has picnic lunches with Hunter down on the riverbank. Fancy grub. Real champagne in a bucket of ice. . . . Where you goin', Loggie?"

"To jail. To git drunk with the only damn' man that has any guts left."

LOGAN BURRELL was fighting mad by the time he'd ridden to Pat Irish's house. It was past sundown, getting dusk, and the

mighty Irish was out in the front yard with his half-dozen youngsters. He was down on all fours with the six of them piled on his broad back.

"I'm a buckin' bronc from the County Cork! Nivir bin rode in me life by human flesh. Now git your holts!"

Pat Irish roared and snorted and his mighty back heaved. Their shrill screams and squeals mingled with his bellowing. And then he let out a howl of pain and heaved them off his back.

"Spurs!" he bellowed. "And a quirt! Ye little divils!"

They ran, squealing, for the house, their shrill laughter taunting the big saloonman.

Pat Irish was stripped to the waist. He got onto his feet, dripping with sweat and roaring with huge laughter as he felt gingerly of the quirt welts and spur marks left there on his hide.

He wiped a huge broken-knuckled hand on his overalls and shoved it at Logan, who had dismounted and come in through the white picket gate. Then he answered the question in Logan's eyes.

"The saloon business is no trade for a decent man wid a fine wife and growin' kids to be in, Loggie. Sheila and Kathleen Mavourneen will soon be young ladies. They'd be shamed by their old man's saloon trade. So when that dirty scut was bound to have the White Elephant, I hung a fancy price on it. One hell av a price, Loggie. And I'm a domned Swede if he don't lay the cash on the barrel-head. I shed me apron and put on me coat and walked out."

"Glad you got a good price, Pat. Tom Rankin said you had the jail keys."

"Sure and I was goin' right over there wid Uncle Clem's supper. The old lady's fixin' him a chicken pie, and chocolate cake. And I'm takin' him a quart from me private stock that I held out. Jean would be takin' her old man his supper, but she's havin' a bit av a picnic down by the river."

There were times when Pat Irish's brogue grew thicker: when he was fighting mad, or when he was cooking up what he called a shanty Irish bit av a trick. There was a devilish twinkle in his eye now. Logan's wrath began to give way to curiosity. "What the devil are you up to, Pat?"

"Follerin' in the grand footsteps av me patron saint, lad. Ye'll recall 'twas Saint Patrick drove the snakes out av Ireland. Maybe ye've noticed the sickenin' stink av two-legged rattlesnakes at Chinook. Now come into the house whilst I wipe the sweat and blood from the spurrin' ye seen the buckin' bronc av County Cork a-gittin'. I'll pull on a shirt and join ye in a gargle av Dublin pot-stilled likker."

In the sitting room, Pat shoved Logan into a large upholstered chair and poked a cigar into the cowman's mouth. He lit the lamp. Then from a table drawer he took a legal-looking document that Logan Burrell recognized with a shock of astonishment.

It was the mortgage on his ranch and LB outfit. Pat Irish twisted the paper and dipped it into the lamp chimney. When it caught fire he pulled it out and shoved it at the long end of the cigar he'd poked into Logan's mouth.

"Light up, Loggie. 'Twill be a sweet smoke."

A hard lump choked Logan Burrell and he had to swallow it down. The smoke got into his eyes. "Where— How—"

"Ask me no questions and ye'll hear no lies. I'll be gittin' a shirt on me back. Then we'll git along to the hoosegow. Uncle Clem will be chawin' the bars."

So that was why Pat Irish had sold the White Elephant to Huntoon Hunter. That was where the money had gone!

Logan sat there smoking the cigar, his throat tight and his eyes stinging. From the back of the house sounded Pat Irish's mighty voice, singing his favorite song, Kathleen Mavourneen.

There were shrill squeals out back as the big man let the youngsters sluice him down under the pump. And then he came back, wearing his Sunday pants and pulling on a stiff-bosomed white shirt. He was carrying a bottle of Irish whisky and the jail keys.

Logan wanted to ask about Jean, but didn't dare. For one thing, he was too almighty prideful. Secondly, he'd get no sensible answer right now from Pat Irish.

THEY were still a hundred yards away when they heard Uncle Clem cussing through the jail bars. "Git me outa here, Loggie! Gimme my gun! And a hatful o' ca'tridges!"

There was something comical as hell about the little man's wrathful cussing and pounding on the jail bars. The waspish-tempered Uncle Clem was what Sheriff Tom Rankin had described as a jail filled with yellowjackets. And at the same time, the sight of Uncle Clem Ferguson locked up in jail made Logan sick deep inside.

Pat and Logan finally got Uncle Clem quieted down. The big saloonman did not light the lamp. They squatted on their hunkers on the cell floor and passed the bottle in the gathering darkness inside the jail.

Logan asked, "Whatever got into your head to butcher a Circle Cross beef, anyhow?"

"Circle Cross beef," grinned the old rascal, "always did have a shore meaty flavor."

"I warned you they'd be watchin' you, Uncle Clem."

The darkness hid the tiny blue blaze in the grizzled little cowman's puckered eyes.

"When a boil on the back of your neck is comin' to a head, son, best thing to do is whet your Barlow blade an' whop 'er open. Did Pat tell yuh they're fixin' to kangaroo court me to the pen in the mornin'? Cut an' dried like jerky. Guilty. Twenty-five years. Time off fer good behavior. You fetch plenty ca'tridges, Loggie?"

Pat Irish shoved the bottle at Uncle Clem and told him to quit hollering so loud. "Uncle Clem," said Pat, "was scared that Jean was fixin' to marry Herbie Stearns to lift the mortgage. But he gambled that Ben Stearns wouldn't let his pride and joy marry the daughter of a jailbird. . . . Here's your domned mortgage, Clem. Light this cigar wid it."

"Where'd you git it, Pat? You ain't robbed the damn' bank!"

"It's paid, legal. So's Logan's. It's goin' to gripe that tinhorn Hunter. And Ben Stearns is likely to bite hisself like a teased rattler and die av his own domn poison, when they find out."

"You mean," said Logan Burrell, "they don't know you bought up those mortgages?"

"Not the whiff av a suspicion, lad."

"Then how—?"

"Herbie." Pat Irish chuckled softly. "The white-collared Herbie. The cashier av a bank has the run av the joint. . . . Oh, 'twas legal enough. A strictly cash deal. Only we didn't shout it to the four corners av the universe."

"That white-collared squirt," snapped Uncle Clem. "That underhanded young whelp. He come a-crawlin' to me with a proposition that smelt like a dead skunk. Rode out to the ranch with it the day I butchered that Circle Cross beef. Said he'd give Jean the mortgage for a weddin' present. I doubled a wet rope and run him off my place—then butchered a beef. That dollar-wranglin' whelp!"

"Herbie," chuckled Pat Irish, "is a feller with a secret vice. Poker. I carried Herbie on my book from month to month—cash I'd loaned him to pay his gamblin' losses to Cliff Curnett. Cliff let the young sucker win jest often enough to lead him on to the next bleedin'. Herbie was too smart, though, to let a tricky feller like Cliff hold his I. O. U. paper, Herbie an' Cliff bein' stuck on the same girl. Meanin' Jeanie. . . . Whoa! Keep your domned shirts on!"

"If ever that damned Cliff laid a hand—" Logan's voice thickened with cold fury.

"Take it easy. Let's git down to cases, gintlemen. 'Tis jail-breakin' shenanigans we're up to now, and illegal as hell. Pass me the bottle, Uncle Clem. I'm checkin' the bet to Loggie Burrell."

Logan rolled and lit a brown-paper cigarette. The cupped match-flame in his hands showed a reckless grin on his face.

"I taken you at your word, Uncle Clem. Fetched you a ridge-runner, and there's a saddle gun and a boot-leg full of ca'tridges. The sheriff's laid up with a busted leg. All we got to do is overpower Pat Irish and let you out."

"Just lock me up in here," chuckled Pat, "and give the jail keys to the old woman when you ride past the house. 'Twill look neater thataway. I'd be itchin' to mix into the battle royal, but I got the old woman and the kids to look after and the best I kin do is swing a towel in your corner. And good luck to yez."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhack Bride

LOGAN and Uncle Clem went out, leaving the jail door wide open. Uncle Clem forked the saddled horse Logan had fetched him. As they headed straight for the box-elder park picnic grounds, they heard shooting uptown—like Cliff Curnett's imported tough cowhands were painting the town red. The jail was at the edge of town and they could see men riding into the Bucket of Blood and the White Elephant, six-shooters blazing.

"And Sheriff Tom Rankin laid up in bed," growled Logan, "with a broken leg in a plaster cast."

"How'd Tom bust a laig?" snapped Uncle Clem.

"I never asked him."

They rode on at a high trot, their hands near their guns, down along the river road, through giant cottonwoods that threw heavy black shadows across the moonlight. They were nearing the box-elder park when they heard Jean Ferguson scream.

"Look out!" That was Jean's voice, shrill and brittle.

They heard the heavy roar of a .45; then the

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sharp crack of a smaller .38. Brush crashed and shod hoofs pounded.

Logan and Uncle Clem jumped their horses into the buckbrush, off the moonlit road. Their guns were in their hands as Jean Ferguson raced past them. She was lying low across the neck of her running pony. Her face was a little white, and she had a small pistol in her hand. Logan reached out and put his hand across Uncle Clem's white-mustached mouth.

"She's all right," he said huskily. "Let her go."

"By grab, Loggie," Uncle Clem flung away the hand across his mouth, "the young un' was grinnin'! Scared, but grinnin'!"

"She didn't look hurt," conceded Logan gruffly.

Then they heard Huntoon's voice at the edge of the park.

"All right, Burrell! You missed your first shot. Now let's see if you've got the guts to step out in the open and fight. I'll come out of the brush when you do. Or haven't you got guts enough to fight for your woman?"

There was no reply to the gambler's challenge. At the other side of the open park, in the tall box elders, a man was mounting his hidden horse and starting a quiet getaway. Logan and Uncle Clem caught a brief glimpse of the horse and rider.

"That's Cliff Curnett," said Logan. "He's your bear meat, Uncle Clem. I'll take the tinhorn." His voice was a tense whisper.

"Have at 'im, then, Loggie," came Uncle Clem's low-pitched reply. "Don't shoot to miss."

Uncle Clem reined his horse around and headed back to angle in ahead of Cliff Curnett and cut him off before he reached town.

THE brush patch that sheltered Hunter was back from the river's edge, like a small island out near the center of the open park. One giant cottonwood was surrounded by wild roses, wild gooseberry and currant bushes that had not been cleared away because of their fragrant flowers and their berries.

Huntoon Hunter crouched in the thorny brush and cursed in his flat-toned voice. His predicament was dangerous. Likewise it was somewhat ridiculous, and that rankled. Hunter wasn't used to being repulsed. He'd been accustomed to the flattery of beautiful women—sleek, sophisticated women of the world who played a silken-smooth game when he dealt the cards. Now the daughter of a half-witted Carrie Nation biddy and a drunken cow-thief had led him on with her crude country-gal flirting, then turned she-wildcat on him. She'd raked his face with her damned claws, played hard to get. He'd lost his temper and gotten rough. But she'd broken away, and there'd been a gun in her hand, pointed at his white broadcloth shirt. There had been a murderous fury in her eyes when she told him she was going to kill him if he touched her or came one step closer.

Then a dry twig had snapped under a boot at the brushy edge of the clearing. A voice had cut in. "Stand outa line, Jean—I'm dealin'!"

She'd screamed then. "Look out!" Hunter had dived in under the table and into the thorny brush. A .45 bullet had splintered the heavy pine table above his head as he went under it.

And now he crouched there in the brush, his face and hands scratched by the thorny brush, his shirt torn and his necktie yanked out of place. There were dirt and grass-stains on his tailored whipcord riding pants. His sleek hair was rumpled and fouled with dust and dried leaves from the brush. He'd lost his gambler's calm. A killer's hot anger gripped him.

"You're a dirty sneaking bushwhacker, Burrell. I don't want your damned girl and if she ever thought for one idiotic second that I had honorable intentions she has a weak brain. You think I'd marry a cheap little country wench that never had anything but floursack and gingham to wear? Well, that's what you're fighting for, Burrell. Let's take it out in the open."

"SUITS me, tinhorn."

The gambler twisted around. Logan Burrell's cold voice had come from the wrong direction—and it was not the voice of the bushwhacker who had told Jean Ferguson to stand out of line. Now, with a sudden shock, he identified that first voice. That had been Cliff Curnett!

"Where'd you come from?" he asked flatly. "When did you get here?"

"I just come from jail, where I sprung Uncle Clem. We rode up about the time the lady saved you from bein' bushwhacked by Curnett. Uncle Clem will take care of your double-crossin' pardner. Now will you crawl outa your coyote hole, you damned cheap tinhorn? Or do I go in after you and drag you out?"

"I'll make a deal with you, Burrell. Ride back to town. I'll meet you at the White Elephant. An even break. Winner take all. I'll lay your mortgage on the line. . . ."

"Pat Irish picked up the mortgages on my outfit and Clem Ferguson's ranch. You've got nothin' to bet but your slimy hide. And I'm comin' after that, Hunter!"

If Huntoon Hunter had been as used to the outdoors as he was to gambling houses, he would have heard and interpreted the faint sounds Logan Burrell made as he crept on foot around the edge of the clearing, until he'd reached the place he wanted. There he

crouched for a second or two like a footracer at the starting line. Then he crossed the fifty-foot clearing with all the speed he could drive into his legs. He dove low under the table, head-first into the brush as the gambler shot twice and missed both times by inches.

Clearly, from perhaps a couple or three hundred yards away, Logan heard Uncle Clem Ferguson's voice lifted in a shout.

"Fill your hand, Curnett! This is Pete's payoff."

Then came the rapid crashing explosion of gunfire.

"There goes your pardner to hell, Hunter!"

Then Logan Burrell went through the brush like a charging bull. Thorns ripped his face and tore at his clothes. A gun roared and the stabbing flame blinded him for a split second; he felt the burning, tearing thud of a .45 slug ripping his right shoulder.

He'd crashed through the heavy brush with his six-shooter gripped in both hands so that his forearms and elbows broke the brush away from his face as he dove through. Now his right hand slipped numbly away, but the gun was still gripped in his left hand. He thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger as he crashed into the gambler.

Hunter's gun-barrel grazed his head in a savage blow, and pain exploded inside his skull. He shook his head, jammed the muzzle of his gun against the other man and pulled the trigger. The gambler's hoarse scream was in Logan's ears. The gun clubbed at his head.

He was weak, dizzy, hardly conscious. He was going out into a black oblivion. Thumb back the gun-hammer. Half-cock . . . full cock . . . pull the trigger . . . the gun shoved against something. A man's body. Or maybe the ground. Last shot. End of the line. All out . . . all out for a drink of likker. . . .

LOGAN came alive in bed. Sunlight streamed in through an open window. There was the cool, slick feeling of clean white sheets. His eyes blinked open against pain that was like a club. Better shut his eyes; maybe the pain would quit. But it didn't. It dulled down to the beat of his pulse.

"His pulse isn't too weak, Doc. It's getting stronger. Or maybe I'm just excited—hoping. . . . You take it." That was Jean's voice.

"If Loggie's got ary pulse a-tall," sounded Uncle Clem's voice, "he'll be dancin' at his own weddin' in a week. Gimme that bottle once more, Pat."

"Likker ain't good fer a wounded man."

"The hell what Doc says. I gut-shot that Cliff Curnett. Gun-chores give a man a thirst thataway. I ain't more'n scratched. Nick a Texan's hide an' it ruins a bullet, but does the man no harm. . . ."

Logan Burrell got his eyes open. He saw Sheriff Tom Rankin walk across the large room to another bed where Uncle Clem lay propped up.

"I thought you had a busted leg in a plaster cast." Logan didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Jean gave a little sobbing cry and dropped a glass of water she'd just filled.

Sheriff Tom Rankin turned his head and grinned. "That's what Cliff Curnett's imported tough hands thought, when they commenced tearin' the town apart. Me'n Doc figgered out that plaster cast trick. Pat's goin' to paint green letterin' on it an' hang it up on his back bar in the White Elephant. "TOM RANKIN FOR SHERIFF."

Jean smoothed back his hair and kissed him on the mouth. There were tears in her eyes, but she was laughing.

Pat Irish had two black eyes and a cut mouth, but he was in high spirits. He said the Bear Paw Pool outfit had backed Sheriff Tom Rankin and they'd run Cliff Curnett's tough hands out of the cow-country. The jail keys seemed to be lost, so they loaded the prisoners they took on a fast freight and shipped them like a carload of livestock, Wyoming bound. And Pat had cleaned out the White Elephant which he'd taken back by the law of his two bare-knuckled fists—and the bung-starter.

"I got to thinkin' it over, Loggie. What's disgraceful about the saloon business? Not a damn' thing. Unless you sell rotgut stuff, which me joint never done. There'll be free champagne for your weddin', lad. Compliments av Huntoon Hunter."

"I'll have a glass of beer," said Jean. "Champagne. Ugh!"

"She ribbed up a neat shenanigan, Loggie," chuckled Pat Irish. "Played Hunter agin' Curnett—then got chicken-hearted when it come time fer the killin'. 'Tis a lovin' wife she'll be makin' ye, lad."

"They've got us marching down the wedding aisle, Loggie," said Jean. "Hadn't you maybe better declare yourself, one way or the other?"

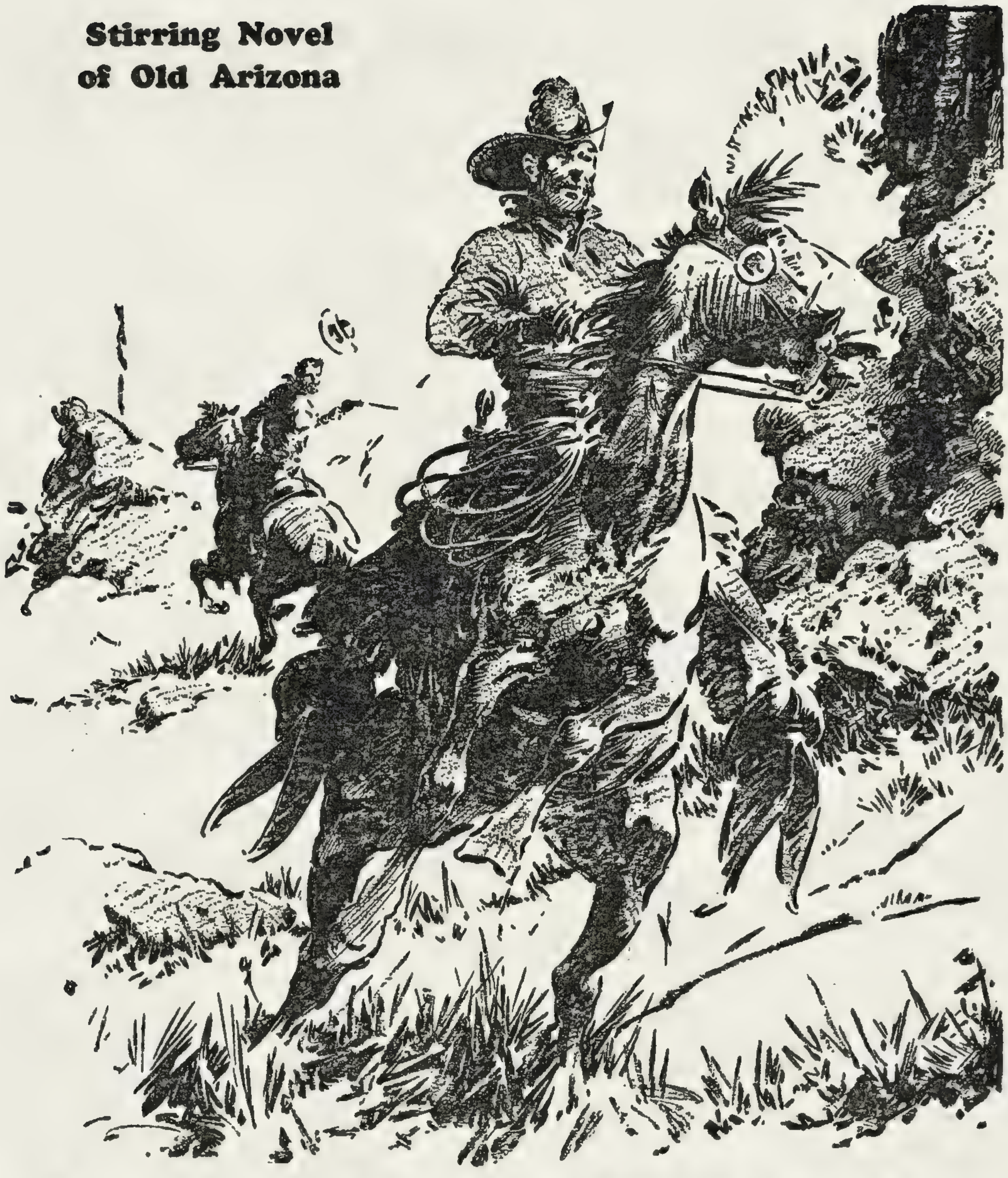
"I reckon—" the pain had gone as if by some miracle as he reached up his uninjured arm and pulled her head down to his—"it's time I put you in the LB iron before some feller like Herbie mav'ricks you."

"Herbie," said Jean, when she'd kissed him, "has gone away. Ben Stearns sold out his bank to Pat Irish and Doc Steel and took his Herbie back to Chicago. . . . Now I'll clear the room and you go to sleep. I'll ride herd on you."

Caught, Logan thought drowsily. *Hamstrung and hog-tied. But by golly, it feels good!*

THE END

Stirring Novel of Old Arizona



The Pistol-Prophet Hits Two-Mile

By Nelson William Baker

CHAPTER ONE

Parson of Powdersmoke

RINGO MASON, mayor of Two-Mile City, sat at his mahogany-topped desk in the spacious office of his Sundust Saloon, immersed in thought.

A strapping, handsome man, with a shock of yellow hair and a large, genial face, he gripped a whisky glass in one hand, the other toying with the massive gold watch-chain across the front of his polkadot vest. He stared broodingly at the stoop-shouldered man bent over a desk in the far corner of the office.

"Read your law, Shalley," he commanded,

Sands fired at the same time as the fleeing man.

Two-Mile City politicos boasted how they'd bullet-dance Preacher Sands' long-gone prodigal out of town, as they had his psalm-shouting sire.... But Rawlin Sands had inherited a stake in that killer-ridden hell-town, that neither blood nor bullets could take away!

Bart Shalley, justice of the peace, cleared his throat, ran a finger around the tight confines of his high celluloid collar. His small bright eyes held a glint of apprehension, and a film of nervous sweat glistened on his sallow face as he thumbed the pages of the book before him.

"The law says," he recited sonorously, "that no man shall be evicted from his rightful home and property without due cause and consideration, to wit—"

Mason tossed an impatient hand. "I'll make my own law to fit this case, Shalley. Those

grangers have been sniffing at my heels ever since I pushed them out of here five years ago. How they connect my name with this rustling, I can't guess. But their talk is dangerous; they've got to be wiped out before they have a chance to cause trouble."

Shalley wagged his bald head. "Better keep your larceny looking at least halfway legal, Ringo. There are men here, like Nat Burton, who might push an investigation if those grangers were persecuted without apparent reason."

"Don't be a fool," Mason snorted. "Did you ever know me to 'persecute', as you term it, without reason? I have my position in this country to uphold, the respect of Nancy Burton to consider."

He laughed and drained his glass. "There'll be a reason—one that will appear so legal righteous that Nat Burton and his friends will be first to howl for those grangers' hides."

Mason stared out a window over rolling Arizona hills, tawny now with rich graze that fattened his vast 7-Lazy-M herds. A steady drone of voices came from the bar, and Mason smiled with satisfaction.

He could brag that he had made this valley the prosperous cow-country it was. He could reflect without a qualm of conscience that he had by sheer treachery wrested it from the hardy grangers who had settled here and built the town. Step by step he recounted his moves in that purge of five years ago. He was startled when the office door burst open. For a moment he stared at the lank, range-clad man framed in the doorway.

"Forgetting your manners, Lon?" he asked coldly. "That door's marked 'Private'."

SHERIFF LON DUNCAN closed the door and slid into a chair before Mason's desk.

"Mebbe you better keep your door locked from now on, Ringo," he said cryptically. "Preacher Sands' kid is comin' back to town."

"Preacher Sands' kid," Mason repeated slowly. "Preacher Sands was the hymn-singing leader of those grangers I had my men ride out of town on a rail as an example to those hard-headed farmers. His kid was a quiet, timid sort, like his father." He glanced sharply at Duncan. "Where'd you learn this, Lon?"

"I caught that sodbuster Linsey's wife in town today," Duncan replied sourly. "Said she was after medicine for Linsey's heart-trouble. When I told her to get out of town, she flared up an' told me it'd be a different story when young Sands got back."

Mason laughed. "A preacher's kid! Coming to clean up my town and hand it back to those grangers!"

"Er—better consider, Ringo," Shalley cautioned nervously. "Five years will make Rawlin Sands twenty-one. He might prove—er—dangerous."

Mason regarded the lawyer with contempt. "Naturally, I'm not overlooking any bets, Shalley. This Sands may have some ideas. We'll have to get him out of town. Think you'd recognize the kid, Lon?"

"He'll be the spittin' image of his old man."

"Watch out, Duncan," Shalley sneered. "If you pick the wrong man, your law-badge won't save your neck!"

Duncan turned. "It's your own buzzard neck you're worryin' about, Shalley. You're yellow!"

Mason slapped a hand on his desk. "Now look here, boys, I'll have no petty quarreling at a time like this. You have good jobs, good salaries, and I need you. I'd hate to bring up those old murder charges. . . . Now get out, Lon, and let me know the minute Sands arrives."

Duncan turned at the door. "Supposin' this Sands hombre cottons onto the little game you're playin' here an' spills it? How long would you last then, Ringo?"

Mason frowned for a moment at the closed door, and Shalley's tongue clucked in sullen annoyance. "That fool's mistakes will send us all over the road some day, Ringo. Why you tolerate his insolence—"

Mason voiced his thought. "When I find a man with a faster gun, Lon will step down—suddenly." He poured himself a drink. "Shalley, I've decided to give those grangers ten days to pull their freight, or suffer the consequences of being exposed for calf-stealing—something they should understand from past experience. When you finish writing out that eviction order, get Ace McCord in here. We'll cook up a welcome for Rawlin Sands that will make him glad to leave our fair city in a hurry!"

SHERIFF DUNCAN was sitting on the long gallery of the Sunset Saloon when the stage from Crosson ground to a stop before the Cattleman's Hotel. The sweating flanks of the horses glistened, and the stage creaked and tilted as each passenger stepped out onto the board sidewalk. There were two gray-haired cowmen, and a city drummer. The last man out drew a grunt of satisfaction from Duncan. He rose quickly and entered the saloon. Inside, he turned and directed a searching stare at the man who was heading for the saloon steps.

He was tall and spare, with a finely-chiseled face that looked strangely pale in this country of leather-skinned men. He wore a flat-crowned black hat, ministerial frock coat and string tie, and carried a worn grip-sack. He had mounted the steps before Duncan nodded to himself and made for Mason's office.

He entered without knocking. "Sands just come in."

Mason and Shalley rose without a word and moved to the door. Mason opened it a crack and ran his eyes over the room. There were several men at the long bar—half of them his own 7-Lazy-M punchers. His foreman, Ace McCord, sat at a table alone, a glass and bottle before him. Among those at the bar were Nat Burton and two strangers: a tall, hard-faced young cowboy, with two guns tied low against his faded jeans and the young man in ministerial garb who stood with a glass of water before him. Mason studied the latter, nodding.

"That's Sands in the black getup."

"Yeah," Duncan agreed. "Playin' right into it, the way his old man always did."

Shalley crowded in for a look, his sharp eyes squinting dubiously. "I believe you're right for once, Lon," he whispered. "He certainly has the characteristic features of Preacher Sands."

Duncan turned to Mason, "Who's the yearlin' that thinks he's a two-gunner?"

"Some kid that's been pestering me for a range job," Mason said. "All right, Lon. Let's get this over. Tip McCord off. Awkward, with Burton looking on, but Ace will know how to handle it."

Duncan slipped out, paused for a moment at McCord's table, then went out the front door. McCord finished his drink, and sauntered to the bar. He was a big, thick-shouldered man, with an arrogant face. He favored the black-garbed young man with a direct stare, then stepped back.

"If it ain't a preachin' man!" he declared in a booming voice, turning toward the men at the bar. "Hats off, you sinful cow-hazers. Belly up. I'm buyin' drinks all around, includin' you, Parson."

The young man glanced up from his glass of cold water. He said quietly, "Many thanks, friend, but water's aplenty for me."

McCord snatched the cue. "Too high an' mighty to drink with me an' these honest punchers, are you? Mebbe you'd like to hop up on the bar an' save our sinful souls with a sermon before you leave town!" Grinning, he drew his gun. "Hop, or get singed by hellfire!"

Ace McCord, half-drunk, had a reputation for putting on a good show, and the onlookers smiled—all except Nat Burton and the hard-faced young cowboy. The latter stood with his drink poised halfway to his lips.

McCord's sixgun exploded and sawdust spouted between the parson's feet. He winced, but his feet remained staunchly rooted.

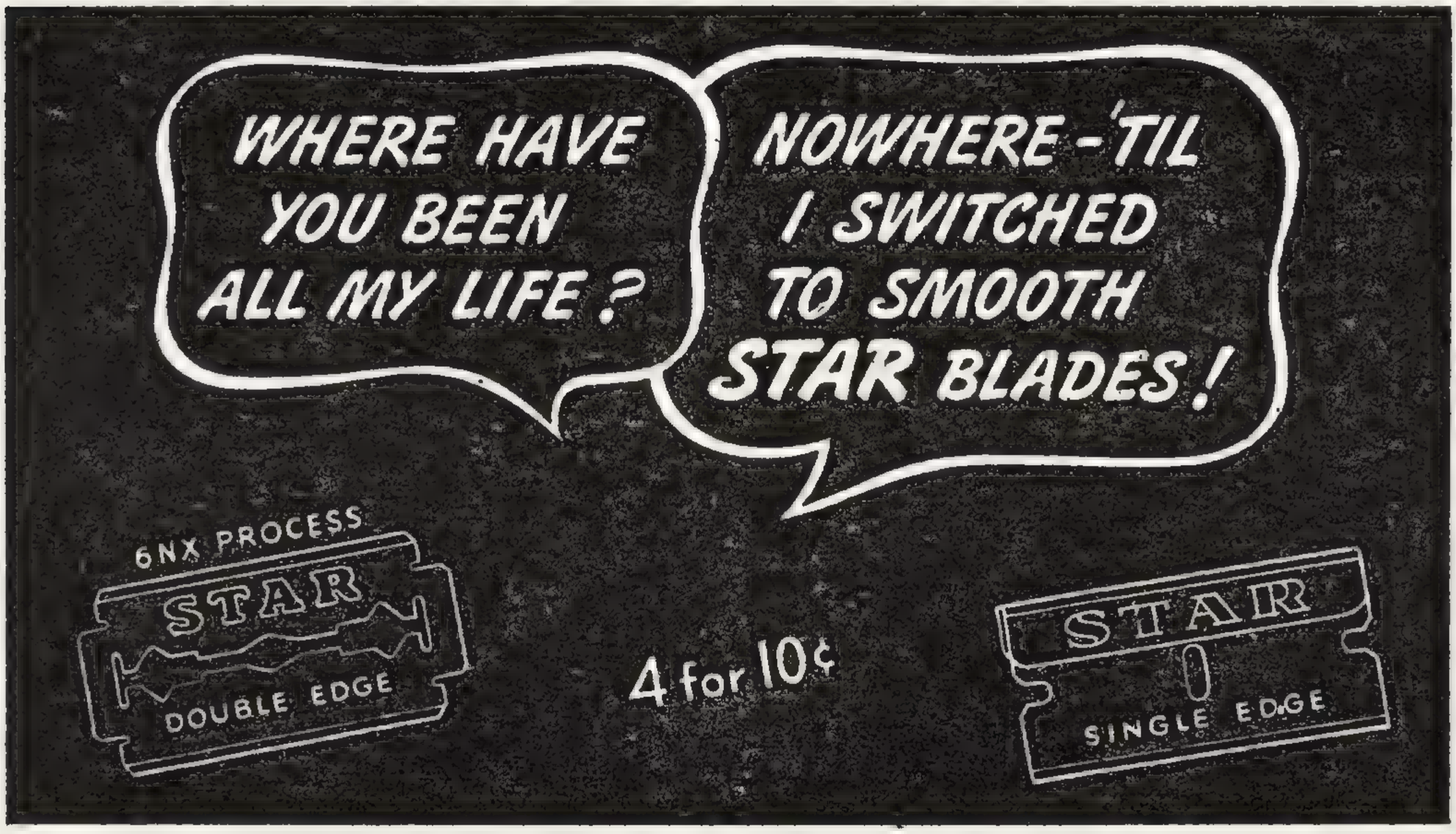
McCord fired again, swearing. His bullet struck an inch from the parson's boot. With a hand that trembled slightly, the young man picked up his glass of water, and McCord sideswiped with his gun. The barrel shattered the glass a foot from the parson's face.

Ringo Mason's smile faded; Shalley drew a sharp breath; for the hard-faced cowboy had suddenly stepped in and whirled McCord around.

He stood now facing McCord, thumbs hooked in his crossed gunbelts, watching the foreman with cold intensity.

"Pretty crude comedy, mister. Try it on me."

McCord might, for a shaved second, have



considered using the smoking gun in his hand; but he was not too drunk to remember that Mason would stand for no open killings. He shoved the gun into its holster, appraising his man with the eye of an experienced barroom fighter. Then McCord suddenly swung a fist.

The young cowboy moved his head and the fist shot over his shoulder. He ripped into McCord, then, with a fury that drew a gasp from the crowd. He pummeled McCord's paunch, smashed his face. Stepping in, he let go a short, vicious right hand. It exploded on McCord's chin and his head snapped back, his eyes rolled. He spun face-down to the sawdust-littered floor.

Two 7-Lazy-M punchers grabbed bottles off the bar and charged over McCord's body, others pressing close behind them. The cowboy took a fast step backward. His two Colts exploded simultaneously in an ear-splitting roar. The bottles raised in the two punchers' hands dissolved in a shower of bursting glass.

THAT set them back on their heels. The red-jowled bartender jerked away from the sawed-off shotgun, made a fast move to get his hands in plain sight.

The cowboy's smile held a touch of bravado. He suggested quietly, "Unbuckle your gunbelts, gents."

Too late, he heard the faint swish of the batwing doors behind him, caught the expression of quick warning in the parson's face. A gun pressed against his spine, and Sheriff Lon Duncan's nasal voice ordered, "Drop them guns, or eat lead. The law speakin'."

He remembered Duncan's voice—too well. It stirred in him now an overwhelming impulse to turn and shout that he was Rawlin Sands, that he was back to settle accounts for the brutal injustice perpetrated against his father and granger friends; that Ringo Mason and his crew could look to their guns and be damned to them!

But he remembered the role he had schooled himself to play. Slowly he started to let his guns slip from his hands. His glance touched the sawdust-littered floor, and he clutched the weapons back desperately—to him these big, matched Colts were the highly specialized tools of a master craftsman.

"You can feed your lead, lawman," he flung back. "I'm not droppin' these sixes."

Cautiously, as a man might bait a coiled rattler, he eased his guns down into their holsters, marveling as seconds ticked away, that he remained alive.

Then his hands came up empty and he moved away from the gun's pressure. Then he was standing at the bar, raising his half-empty glass to his lips, the straightness of his back a challenge. His eyes found Duncan in the bar-mirror.

The sheriff was crouched, gun pointing, his hatchet face twisted. Even as Burton and the parson cried warning, Sands divined the man's intention and spun.

He drew and fired, his gun speaking a mere heartbeat behind Duncan's. He heard the sheriff's lead shatter the bar mirror, as his own struck home. He watched Lon Duncan reel and go down.

Mason's punchers, he saw, intended to mind their own business; he had no fear of the rest horning in. Sands reloaded with steady fingers, dropped his gun into its holster.

BEHIND his office door, Ringo Mason slipped a snub-nosed belly-gun back into its shoulder holster. "By heaven, Shalley," he murmured, "there's a man worth winning over!"

He flung the door open and stepped out, dominating the room. His big face placid, he took in the carnage at a glance, then stared at Rawlin Sands with unconcealed approval.

Sands returned that stare, long-banked fires smouldering in the depths of his blue eyes. The moment of appraisal passed, and he felt that he was safe from recognition. He sensed the strength and confidence emanating from the big man. It required all his will to face it and play out his role.

Mason said, "You don't play for fun, do you?"

"I hate to see a man kicked around when he's mindin' his business."

Mason nodded. "I've seen you around town. What's your name, and where do you hail from?"

Sands shot a glance at the parson, said with dry humor, "Call me 'Saint'. Where I hail from don't matter. I like your town, and I'm still hittin' you for that brush-poppin' job. How about it?"

Mason laughed. "You'd be wasting your talents punching cows."

A crowd had filtered in from the street. Stimulated, Mason smiled his politician's smile, winked at his punchers. "A heller, isn't he, boys? Coldcocks my foreman, guns the sheriff of our fair city when we need him most." He shook his head. "We can't expect our meager jail to hold a man of his caliber. Only thing to do, as I see it, is put him to work rodding the law."

He bent over the still unconscious Lon Duncan, plucked the star from his blood-soaked vest. With affected ceremony that drew sniggers from the crowd, he pinned it on Sands' shirt pocket, then stepped back with a slight bow.

"Our new acting sheriff, the Saint," he addressed the crowd banteringly. "See that all you sinners cooperate with him, or he'll bless you with bullets."

A roar of laughter went up. Sands held his peace, a wry grin masking his dull anger. He could understand now why Mason held the town in the palm of his hand; the man was a superb showman.

Mason flung up his hands for silence. "Drinks on the house, everybody. All right, boys. Get Lon over to Doc Ransome. Throw a bucket of water on Ace and get him home." He winked and turned to Sands. "Come into my office, Sheriff, and we'll launch you on your career."

Marveling at the man's poise and assurance, Sands stepped toward the office door. Before entering, he turned, caught the parson's eye, and grinned.

"You brought me a piece of luck, friend," he said. "I'll be seein' you later."

CHAPTER TWO

The Saint, Sixgun Sheriff

WHEN Sands emerged from Mason's office an hour later, he felt like a small boy entrusted with the key to a jam cupboard. The whole picture was clear now. Mason had somehow learned that Rawlin Sands meant to return, had planned a suitable welcome, had picked the wrong man—a mild, paled-faced parson!

Here he was, a sheriff's star on his shirt, commissioned to serve an eviction notice on the granger friends he had come home to vindicate, ordered to escort himself out of town. Ringo Mason, master of connivance, had played straight into his hand!

He sobered, then, all the implications of his pseudo-alliance with Mason suddenly driven home to him. He had come back to break the man, to expose him for what he was. But three days had been enough to show him how deeply Mason had entrenched himself. The town was a wide-open center for all the big trail-herds in the Valley of the Little Colorado. The townspeople hailed Mason as the founder of this new prosperity, as a great leader. Sands stared into space, foreseeing the gigantic task of shattering that faith. A single slip now, and he was a dead man.

He unfolded the paper in his hand, and read the formal, black-inked wording of the eviction order:

> Notice to all Grangers:
> The Valley Cattlemen's Association is prepared to bring court suit against you on recently-acquired evidence of illegally butchering Association members' stock.
> Aware of your present inadequate circumstances, we are hereby granting you ten days to quit the country before pressing charges.
> Signed: R. M.
> President, VCA

Sands had a pain-sharp memory of his father, gun-whipped, ruthlessly driven out of this town he and his friends had founded, and his fingers crumpled the paper. A hand touched him, and he turned to face the young parson.

"I've been waiting to thank you for your support against that drunken bully," the man was saying quietly. "It was a fine, brave thing."

Sands smiled, then remembering the distasteful chore he must do, the germ of an idea struck him.

He said, "There's no room in this town for a parson, friend—not until the air clears. I reckon you'll be safer if you come along with me. Pick up your grip-sack, and let's go."

At the City Livery Stables, where Sands had left his steeldust when he hit town, the hostler blinked at the law-badge. He saddled Sands' horse, and was selecting one for the parson, when Sands saw a buckboard heading north out of town. A man and young woman occupied the seat. Sands hailed them. "You folks mind toting a passenger out a ways?"

They pulled up, and the big, gray-mustached man stared at Sands a moment. His rig was expensive, and his team fine stock; obviously he was a cowman of some importance.

"Glad to do a favor for the new sheriff," the man said, and laughed heartily. "That was a real show you gave us in the Sundust. Any man that can whip McCord and Duncan in the same day is good for my money. Mason showed brains when he hired you."

The girl flushed. "Hush, father."

"Sure, sure," the big man laughed. "Sheriff, I'm Nat Burton, and this is my daughter, Nancy. We own the T-Bar-40 outfit, up north a ways."

SANDS swept off his hat. He remembered Burton now; the only cowman in the valley big enough to buck Ringo Mason. Their ranges joined several miles north, and Burton, he recalled, had been smart enough to pad his crew with sufficient gunmen to protect his interests. A good man to know, Sands thought.

The girl was fresh and pretty, her dark hair swept back below the brim of her big hat, her gray eyes clear and friendly. Their eyes touched, and Sands wondered for an instant if he had seen a spark of recognition in her glance.

He said awkwardly, "I'll get my man," and entered the stable.

At the stable door, he pulled the parson aside. "Look, friend," he said in low tones, "I'm not a man to ask a return favor for one done, but I'm askin' this of you: For the time bein', forget your name, where you came from. You're Rawlin Sands; this is your home town; you're headin' out to visit some granger

friends of yours. To save you tellin' a white lie, I'll do most of the talkin' yonder. I need your help, friend. Can I count on you—without askin' questions?"

The parson looked confused. "I don't understand all this, Sheriff. But I like you, and I'll do it. I know you'll explain when the time is right.."

Sands stowed the parson and his luggage in the bed of the buckboard with a vague introduction. As he swung up on his steeldust, he gave the girl a smile.

She dropped her gaze to his right hand, resting on the pommel. "Your hand—you should have it tended."

Sands glanced at the knuckles he had split on McCord's tough chin. He grinned, "That's what comes of bein' a roughneck."

Burton guffawed, and they moved off, Sands deliberately swinging in on the girl's side.

Burton addressed the parson. "I remember you, Sands. Your dad preached here, taught school. A fine man. Afraid there aren't many of your granger friends left around here now. I'm a born-and-bred cowman, but, by thunder, I believe cowmen and grangers can do a better job all around if they work together."

"Indeed you're right," the parson said with feeling.

Relieved, Sands gave him a sly nod of approval.

The girl said pertly, "I wouldn't be too sure, Parson. Those grangers have been trying to stir up trouble lately with talk that the mayor is responsible for the cattle rustling. The idea—a man in his position!"

"Can't blame 'em," Burton said. "Years ago Mason gave 'em a dirty deal."

"I think Mister Mason has been very tolerant," Nancy spoke up. "He had the foresight to see this was cow-country, not farmland, and the ambition to develop it. Naturally he wants to keep things running smoothly."

"Then why don't he stop this rustlin'?" Burton demanded.

Sands felt the girl's eyes on him. "Maybe the new sheriff will get some action."

Sands said pointedly, "I'll sure look into it." He stared down at the girl, realizing Mason had impressed her; he could understand that, for he had sensed the strength and charm of the man. He knew, then, that Mason was making a play for Nancy Burton—and the T-Bar-40. He knew, too, that he was going to fight Mason to the death on that count alone, if he failed in everything else.

Burton stopped at a rutty side-road. "Far as we can take you," he said. "Them grangers don't like cowmen—nor lawmen."

PUSHED from their homes by the advent of Mason and the cowmen, those that remained of the grangers, led by Ben Linsey, had established themselves in a cluster of thrown-together shacks in sandy willow-flats along the river. Rows of stunted corn, pole beans and potatoes painted a picture of meager existence, of a last dogged attempt to keep withering roots in the land that had once belonged to them.

Leading his horse down the rutty wagon-road beside the parson, Sands had his first glimpse of the colony. As they came in among the willows, a dozen crowbait horses, whose massive, bony frames bespoke once-fine stock, raised their gaunt heads to eye them suspiciously.

Sands led the way down into the cluster of shacks. A crowd of men with rifles and shotguns materialized around them; haggard, sullen-eyed, ill-nourished men. There was fused dynamite here, and he knew it. He remembered many of these hard-bitten men, and counted on the years and the parson's presence to hide his identity.

Ben Linsey's wife, a thin, gray little woman, with wide, frightened eyes, took them to Ben's bedside, cautioning, "Now don't you rile pa. He's sick!"

Sands gave her a reassuring nod, hating himself for the thing he must do. Then he was in the room, meeting Ben Linsey's gaze.

Even there, there was something of the wounded grizzly about old Ben. The hard angles of his big, raw-boned frame jutted sharply under the single worn blanket.

For a moment, awkward silence hung suspended in the crowded little room. Linsey, Sands saw, was playing a waiting game. One hand remained beneath the covers, and Sands guessed it held a sixgun.

He said warily, "Rawlin Sands and a friend, Linsey," and waited for Ben's reaction.

Linsey's faded blue eyes instantly fastened upon the parson, and Sands let his breath out.

"You ain't growed up the way I'd calculated, Sands," Linsey said, a touch of disappointment in his voice. His eyes narrowed. "We got word you'd be back, but who's this two-gun lawman you got with you?" His hand popped from beneath the blanket, pointing a huge frontier Colt. "We don't like the breed o' lawmen we been seein' of late. What's his business?"

Sands caught the quick uplift of gun-barrels in the hands of the men crowded into the room behind him. But the parson, he saw, was smiling confidently.

"This man," the sky-pilot said easily, "is the new sheriff of Two-Mile City. A superb law-upholder, and, I can assure you, Ben, a friend to all of us." He briefly recounted what had happened to Ace McCord and Lon Duncan in the Sundust, then, looking to Sands for approval, "He gives his name as the 'Saint',

and I think it justly fits his deeds so far. I've put my trust in him. If I were you, I'd do the same, Ben."

It was a good speech, and it touched them, Sands saw.

Linsey bristled to mask his doubt. "I trust nobody till he proves up." He glared at Sands. "But any man puts lead in Lon Duncan's ornery carcass earns my thanks."

A sweat of relief on his forehead, Sands punched back his hat and grinned. "Mason pinned this badge on me, but he's not makin' me his favorite cuttin'-horse. I came out here to bring the parson, and hand out a piece of advice." He dug the crumpled eviction notice from a pocket, tossed it onto the bed.

Linsey read laboriously, a slow flush mounting in his sunken cheeks. He finished, and flung the paper from him.

Sands cut in quickly, "Hold your horses, Linsey, and answer me one question—has Mason any foundation for accusin' you of butcherin' Association stock?"

"Hell, no!" Linsey shouted. "We'd starve afore we et any of that crowd's beef. Ringo Mason's doin' all the stealin' in this neck o' the woods, damn him! Take his notice back to him, or invite him to come out an' get us!"

SANDS pulled up a box chair, sat down. "So Mason's rustlin'?"

Linsey snorted, and his wife spoke up. "You tell him what you know, Pa. It's right he should know what kind of scoundrel he's workin' for."

Linsey said, "Sands here will remember how Mason framed us five years ago, planted green calf-hides on our property, had his killer sheriff, Duncan, 'discover' 'em. The cowmen rid Sands' daddy out of town on a rail. He was dead when we cut him loose. We settled here, hopin' to ketch Mason on some crooked deal an' show him up. The last two-three years cowmen hereabouts have been losin' stock. Not many at a time, but regular, an' they ain't been able to ketch the rustlers. Now Mason is smart. He's built up the country for the cowmen. What for? Why, to cover up. He's suckin' their money an' outfits a dozen ways, an' makin' 'em like it. It's plumb logical he's figured a slick way of drainin' their stock too, ain't it?"

Sands rolled a smoke. "Logical. But you've got to prove it."

"Give us time, an' we'd do it," Linsey declared. He stabbed a gnarled finger at the eviction notice. "There's proof enough for me. Mason knows we been snoopin'. He's scared we'll find somethin'. If he can't do it this way, he'll smoke us out. But we ain't waitin', mister. We're goin' to hit first, afore that ten days is out!"

Sands shook his head.

"From what I've seen of Mason's outfit, Linsey, your boys here won't stand a chance. A play like that will give him the excuse to turn his gunhands loose on you—and no law can touch him. You've got to wait."

Linsey's balled fists pounded dust from the blanket.

"We been dancin' to Mason's damned music for five years. We're through. Now git out o' here. Go back an' tell Mason to round up his gun-hawks—we're a-comin' to kill him!"

TARGET—GERMANY! When those bombers go roaring over Berlin and Hamburg, it's your dimes and dollars that speed them on their way. . . . Your money, lent to the United States Government for a return of four dollars on every three you put up! The 5th War Loan is now on. For your country, and for your own future in a better world, buy now!

Remembering his role, Sands got to his feet and turned to the minister.

"I've got no time to argue with your friend here, Parson," he said. "You better talk him out of this fool play."

The parson nodded, a curious light in his eyes. "I'll do my best, Sheriff."

"Get word to me quick if anything comes up," Sands said, and turned to the door. He brought up short against the barrel of a muzzle-loader.

The raw-boned, red-whiskered giant behind it growled, "You ain't gettin' back to Mason with that information. Linsey's a sick man, or he wouldn't have blowed off his head like that. Somebody fetch a rope."

Sands forced a crooked grin. "You wouldn't shoot a friend, now would you?" he said quietly.

Gently, his eyes holding the man, he put out a hand and pushed the gun aside. He had shouldered through the door, was on his horse and away, before they came to their senses. He glanced back. A knot of men milled in the road, the parson facing them, hands raised, as though to shield Sands' fleeing back.

CHAPTER THREE

Rustlers on the Prod

IT WAS past noon when Sands reached town. Main street was crowded. The threat of his granger friends to launch a suicidal attack against Mason was a problem that demanded immediate attention. Small hope that the parson could influence bull-headed Ben Linsey to wait, perhaps in the remote chance of catching Mason's men planting hides at the colony.

A smile touched his lips. With a little subtle persuasion, Mason might be hurried into his hide-planting. He headed for the Sundust, unaware of the crowd of men stalking purposefully in his wake.

They caught him as he swung from his horse at the steps, blocking his way. The grim faces caused him to step back, hooking his thumbs in his gunbelts.

"We're layin' our cards on the table face-up, Sheriff," a man spoke. "We're losin' cattle to rustlers faster than we can build back. Lon Duncan never gave us no satisfaction. You're a new man. We got a right to know what we can expect from you."

Sands felt the weight of their glances. These, he saw, were small ranchers, who could ill afford even small losses.

He said quietly, "I'm lookin' into it pronto, boys," and he meant that. "Give me a little time, and your cooperation."

"Anything we can do," they agreed, and let him pass.

Mason was waiting for him. The big man motioned Sands into a chair before his desk.

"Make yourself at home, my boy." He lit a cigar. "Now about those grangers. How did they react to that eviction notice?"

Sands ignored Mason's hospitality, rolled a smoke. "They're sure a crusty lot. They say you've got to prove they're butcherin' Association stock before they'll get out."

He saw the hardness come into Mason's eyes. "Regrettable. I'd hoped we wouldn't have to force an issue. This may mean some work for you, my boy." He smiled. "Something a gunfighter of your ability ought to enjoy."

"Yeah, I might, with the right parties," Sands said dryly. "What about this rustlin'? Some of the boys pressed me for action just before I came in."

"That's been a little beyond us," Mason admitted. "Of course, we've been trying to stop it. I'm losing stock right along; so is Nat Burton; and we're equipped to fight that sort of thing, if anyone is. Naturally, we don't feel it the way those small ranchers do. But I've helped them build back, even taken over in some cases. You know, Sheriff," he added slyly, "I have a hunch those grangers may have something to do with it."

"You've got to have men that know the cattle business to rustle," Sands replied. "From what I saw of those grangers, you're barkin' up the wrong tree there, Mason."

"That's exactly the point," Mason declared. "This rustling is unethical from every angle. Anywhere from five to a dozen head disappear into thin air—once, twice, sometimes three times a week. And we never know when or where they're going to strike next. That's what you're up against, my boy. If you care to tackle it, go after it your own way. Your guess is as good as mine."

Mason was beaming. He was, Sands thought, even enthusiastic—as a man might be over his own brain-child.

Sands said, rising, "I might look into it a little. Where do I hitch my carcass when I'm not workin'?"

"Your office is the last building at the south end of Main Street, Sheriff. You have a solid jail there, everything you'll need. The place is yours. Get out and circulate around town. Get acquainted. We have a peaceful place here. Keep things running smoothly, and we'll get along."

SANDS had trouble from the start. In those first few days of rodding the law he made enemies; but in so doing he also made friends.

He cleaned out a crowd of professional gamblers in one of Mason's saloons, exposed a crooked faro-rig and jailed the dealer in another, saw to it that honest men got a square deal—a thing, he was told, that hadn't happened in many a year.

He came to realize that Mason's five big saloons were deeply-imbedded talons with which the man retained his hold upon the town. He felt that by opening the eyes of the townspeople to some of Mason's crooked dealings, he had begun to break that hold, to gain a little favor. He was tramping on Mason's toes, and, for political reasons, Mason dared not reveal the hurt openly.

But the man had other methods. . . .

He called Sands into his office. Bart Shalley was there, and Ace McCord, his face puffed from the beating Sands had given him. McCord, Sands observed, wore his gun tied down.

Mason had the bearing of a man with something on his mind. Wary of the setup, Sands stood where he could keep watch on the trio, thumbs hooked in his gunbelts.

Mason smiled disarmingly. "You're doing a fine job, my boy—but a trifle too good. No need to stir things up too much. In a town like this, we're bound to have a few gamblers. Unless they become a nuisance, I say live and let live. You've made enemies by applying too much pressure."

Sands said, "You told me to keep things runnin' smooth."

Mason said quickly, "But you're taking things a bit too much into your own hands for a youngster on probation. Remember, you're wearing that law-badge because of my generosity."

"Meanin'," Sands said, "that you make the laws in this town?"

"You're a smart boy, Saint. I need ambitious young men like you—but they must have moderation. You can build into a good thing here, if you can listen to reason."

"I'm listenin'."

"That's sensible talk, my boy." Mason lit a cigar. "You have some of my best house-men in jail. I want you to get them back on the job."

"So they can keep pullin' in honest men's money," Sands appended.

"Put it that way if you like. If I don't get their money, someone else will. You can't be too conscientious about money in a wide-open town."

"Nor about rustlin' either, from what I hear," Sands said innocently.

McCord swore. "Don't fool around with him, boss," he snarled. "Let me have him."

The foreman shifted, his hand moving. Sands' two guns flipped from his holsters, and McCord placed his hand on his belt-buckle. Bart Shalley's breathing was audible and heavy.

Mason let himself back in his chair, admiration in his eyes. "A beautiful draw, but put those guns away. One of my boys is standing in the closet behind you with a sawed-off shotgun."

Sands slid his guns into their holsters. "Keep McCord off me," he said quietly, "or you'll be needin' a new foreman."

"No one's going to bother you," Mason said, "as long as you do as you're told. Now one more thing before you go. I've seen you talking with the Burton girl lately. If you have any ambitions in that direction, forget them. I'd hate to see you—disappointed, my boy."

It was out, as Sands knew it would be. "In my book," he said softly, "it says the women decide things like that. So long, Mason."

A few minutes later, Ace McCord walked down the alley, hatred for Mason's new sheriff rising in him at every thump of his bootheels. He had been associated long and closely with Mason; he knew the man planned every move to fit a definite pattern.

In the eyes of the general public, Mason's spectacular inauguration of this saddle-bum kid as sheriff was a joke. To McCord, it was an affront, and an indignity McCord's vindictive nature could not stomach.

SANDS walked slowly down toward his office, knowing Mason had him in a tough spot. To release Mason's men from the jail would brand him instantly as Mason's hired hand, would lose him the small following of honest citizens he had gained. But to ignore Mason's order meant his finish before he had a chance to play his hand out!

A gunsmoke showdown now would leave his purpose unaccomplished. He could kill Mason but the man's following was still too great. Sands' only chance, then, lay in inventing some excuse to hold off, hoping, meantime, that Mason would make his play to frame the grangers. . . .

Nancy Burton was waiting in his office. Her face, he saw, was strained, as though to hold back strong emotion. "Sheriff, you *must* do something about these—these diabolical rustlers," she burst out. "Last night they killed one of our men. He—he was just a youngster."

Her eyes held his, angry, challenging. "They take any stock?" he asked.

"What does that matter against a man's life?"

He said gently, "You can cold-trail 'em easier if they cut out a bunch of cattle."

"Twenty head, then," she said tonelessly. "But these thieves—they don't leave sign."

He looked at her steadily. "That's what they tell me. I'll ride out with you."

The Burton ranch house stood on a high point, commanding a fine view of the river a few miles away. Rolling, grassy hills formed a background for the substantial buildings, with a frame of high buttes bumping their flat tops against a cloudless blue sky in the distance. Nat Burton was waiting for them, his usually cheerful face grim.

"I didn't reckon you'd find time to get out, Sheriff," he said with a touch of sarcasm. "Duncan was always too busy to look into these rustlin's."

Sands said curtly, "I'm not Duncan. Take me out to where the cattle were rustled."

Burton was impatient. "We've been over the ground, Tate Clevis and me. There's no sign. If you want to make a report on the dead man, all right, but—"

"Take the sheriff out there, father," Nancy urged.

Sands had no time to wonder at the curious sidelong glance she flung him as she disappeared inside the house. He, Burton and Tate Clevis, a lean, saturnine man, rode toward the river.

"Clevis, here, was on night guard with the man that was killed," Burton explained. "He can read sign with the best of 'em."

Sands questioned Clevis briefly about the rustling, but got no satisfaction. It appeared he had been unable to tell just what had hap-

pened in the darkness and confusion of the raid. Sands let it go at that, and they rode the rest of the way in silence.

THE herd had been bedded in a small, shallow valley a mile from the river. Sands pulled up and said finally, "We'll just circle this rim. Anybody that choused cattle out of here had to pass over it someplace. If they didn't leave sign with twenty head, they had to carry 'em out."

Clevis said sullenly, "They had to get from the floor to the rim, didn't they? We didn't find no sign leadin' up here."

Burton shrugged. "What I told him, too, Tate."

By noon they had completed the circuit. They found the trails of more than a score of horses and cattle, leaving and entering the valley at widely divergent points.

"Where's it get you?" Clevis scoffed. "Cattle and riders are movin' in and out all the time."

"In a good many places we found horse and cow sign together. Looks to me like those hombres might have ridden in from different directions, cut a few head each, and taken 'em out the same way. That would be plumb misleadin'."

"And plenty of trouble for the rustlin' outfit," Clevis smiled coldly.

Sands said, "Not too much trouble, for an outfit that's been operatin' long as this one has —and expects to keep on. Just to complete the picture, Clevis, we'll say they took 'em out separate, then bunched 'em someplace for easy handlin'—maybe down by the river yonder. They could even swim 'em across. Anyway, I'm lookin' around down there."

Clevis swung on Burton. "He's just wastin' your time, boss," he snarled. "You goin' to drag down there with him?"

"Might as well go the whole hog, Tate," Burton said condescendingly. "If he finds somethin', I want to see it."

Sands took his time along the river. The soft, sloping silt-banks, spots where cattle might be easily driven into the river, yielded nothing. It was pure imagination and his stubborn resolve to follow up his theory that took him up along the steeper cut-banks.

Clevis pulled up. "What the hell you think you'll find up there?" he said contemptuously. "Nobody'd be loco enough to jump cattle off them high banks."

Sands went on without reply. He rode slowly, his eyes on the ground, conscious that the others were some distance behind. The banks were brushy here, chopping off six feet into deep water. He dismounted, leading his steeldust.

Then he stopped short. Here the brush and grass were trampled by milling cattle: cattle fighting the drive of mounted punchers! Sands stared for a moment in perplexity at a strip of brush along the edge of the bank, flattened as though by the weight of a heavy, solid object; a plank, perhaps.

The picture came to him, then, and he marvelled at the ingenuity of the thing. Clevis and Burton had pulled up behind him. He turned, pointing, and said to Clevis, "You're an expert at readin' sign. What you got to say about that?"

CLEVIS sat his horse stiffly, his face mask-like. But Sands had caught the light that leaped and faded in his narrowed eyes, and he was sure of his ground now. He grinned crookedly and looked to Burton for an answer.

"Why, hell, man," Burton burst out, "anybody can see they bunched 'em here and shoved 'em into the river!"

Sands said quickly, "Not into the river. Look at that flattened strip along the edge of the bank. They laid a chute down there, and ran your stock aboard a flatboat. There's your slick rustlin' game."

Burton gaped, absorbing that. "By thunder! I believe you've got it, Sheriff!"

"Yeah," Sands said slowly. "And somethin' else." He was afoot beside his steeldust, Burton and Clevis still mounted. He took a step, so that his view of Clevis was unobstructed. "In a game big as this, it would be smart to plant a tip-off man or two around where they'd do the most good. Somebody got word out you were beddin' this bunch here last night. It had to be one of your hands, Barton. Clevis, here, was night-guardin', you said. The way he's been tryin' to side-track me all day, I'm bettin' he's your tip-off man!"

For an instant that almost cost him his life, Sands believed he had misjudged the man's temperament. Clevis sat his saddle rigidly, his face graying under its tan. He exploded, then, like a delayed-fire cartridge, heeling spurs to his horse. As the animal plunged off, he jerked out his gun.

"You're bettin' to lose, damn you!" he shouted.

Sands' hand was leaping as Clevis fired. Their shots crossed in a fast one-two. Sands thumbed a second shot; but there was no need. Clevis' horse was dancing, riderless. Sands stared for a moment at the puncher's lank, sprawled form. He could see the dark blotch of the bullet's exit between the man's narrow shoulders, and knew that Clevis was dead. He picked up his hat, then, regarding the neat hole through its crown with a solemn face.

Burton had got hold of himself. He licked his lips once, said, "Lord, you killed him quick —but he give himself away by drawin' on you. Here I've been payin' that skunk good wages for three years, and he turns traitor on me."

Sands slapped the dust from his hat, clapped it over his touseled, sandy hair. "I'd bet money every cowman in this valley is payin' wages to men like him. Burton, I want you to get word to 'em to be on the lookout."

"I'm callin' a cowmen's meetin' soon as I can get to town," Burton blustered. "We'll bust this thing wide open!"

Sands said pointedly, "Who you goin' to bust?"

"Why, hell, I—" Burton reddened.

Sands laughed dryly. "All right, Burton. You might guess; but you don't know. We've got somethin' here we've got to connect up." He looked at the man steadily, knowing this was the time and place to drive a bargain. "My stakes in this are big as yours, Burton," he said. "We're buckin' a thing here that's built up over years. It's goin' to take some bustin'. I want to run this show my own way, but I need your help. Can I count on you takin' orders and keepin' quiet about it?"

Burton had a mind of his own. He said warily, "What you plannin' to do?"

Sands considered a moment, then said, "We can't prove a thing till we find who's runnin' this flatboat. If the herds are watched close, the rustlers will lay low until they get word from a tip-off man—we'll keep it quiet how Clevis was killed. An accident, maybe. Get word to a few ranchers you can trust here along the river to ease up, let it get out where they're runnin' some good stock."

Burton nodded slowly. "Sounds reasonable, son. By thunder! I'll work with you."

They loaded Tate Clevis' body across the saddle of his horse and headed toward the T-Bar-40 in the lowering sun.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bounty on the Saint!

SANDS had ridden out of sight of the ranch buildings when a rider moved into the wagon-road ahead of him. It was Nancy Burton, he saw, and his heart capered. He came to a halt beside her.

She said, looking at him steadily, "I've been waiting for you, Sheriff. Since the morning father and I took your parson friend to the granger colony, I've been wondering. What's your game—Rawlin Sands?"

It was out! The expression on her face that day should have warned him. For a moment, he was stunned; but there was no call for denial. It seemed natural that she would have recognized him; after all, they had grown up together.

He spun a brown-paper cigarette before he had an answer, and then his words came warily.

"You keepin' my secret?"

"Not if you mean to cause trouble," she countered. "You're not here just for your health."

"You have to fight trouble with trouble," he said. Thinking of Linsey's threat to make war on Mason, he added, "There's goin' to be blood spilt. I aim to try to stop it."

"You're not going to spill any yourself?" she said bitingly.

"If I have to," he said doggedly.

"It wouldn't be—Ringo Mason's?"

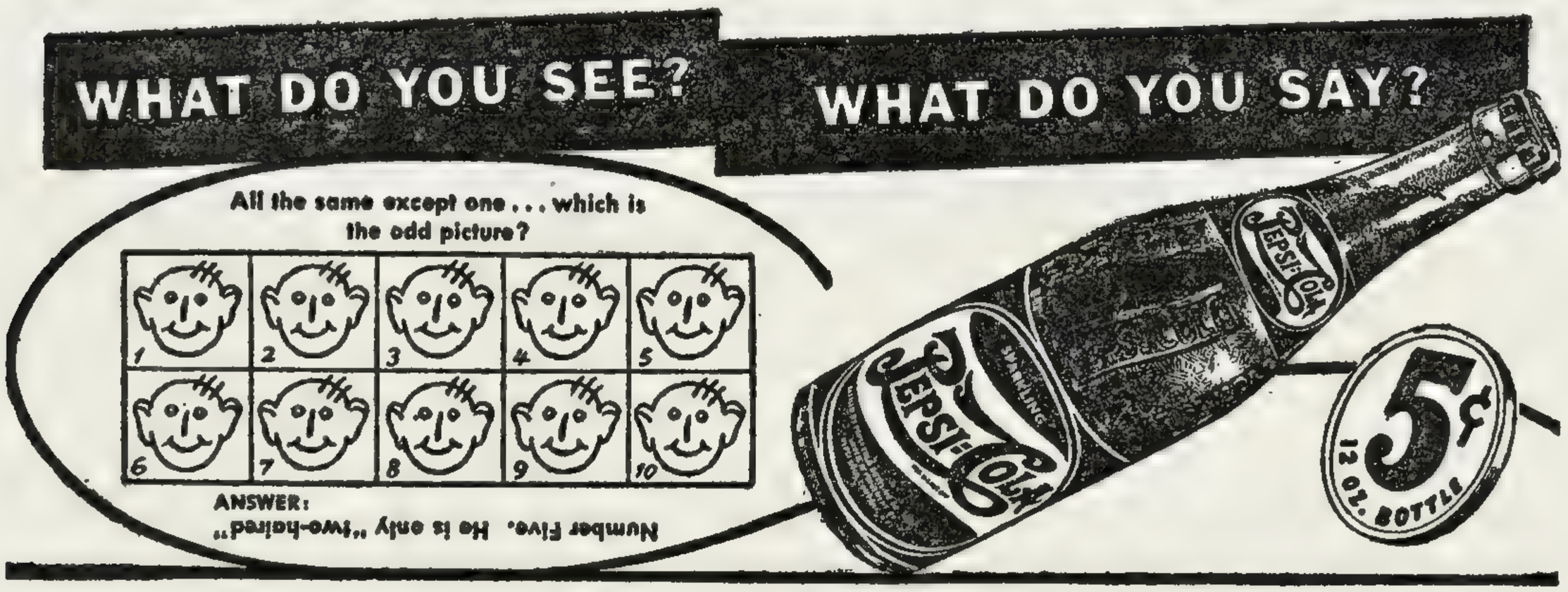
Sands flinched at the anxiety in her tone. "You don't want him hurt, is that it?"

"He's asked me to marry him," she said pertly.

Sands turned on her almost fiercely. "You know what he is? How he got his claws in this country? What he's doin' right now? Well, you will—and I aim to see you don't marry him!"

Her gray eyes snapped. "I know your story, Rawlin Sands. I can see what you've planned. You've made a gunman of yourself. You've come back, willing to sacrifice the peace of this whole valley to get your revenge."

"I've got more than one reason for makin' my play here, now," Sands replied stubbornly. "If I fail, Mason can have his way here—and you. If I win out—"



He looked once, steadily, straight and deeply into her eyes. That look told her more than he could have put into words. He saw the blood come into her cheeks, and gave her a bold, confident smile. He spurred his horse away at a fast run, then, never once looking back.

He went straight to the granger colony. He found Ben Linsey sitting up in bed, stronger, with a gleam in his eye. The parson was there, and a crowd of grangers packed the doorway, taking in every word. He saw with relief that they were minus their guns, were almost friendly, and he could thank the parson for that.

Linsey heard him out, then roared, "Takin' his rustled beef downriver by barge! Why, dammit, Sheriff, we been hearin' them barges slosh past in dead o' night a hunderd times in the past two-three years, not thinkin' a thing about it. Wait'll we shove this under Mason's nose!"

Sands grinned. "Not so fast, Linsey. Some of you boys build me a light raft I can handle easy. Startin' tonight, we'll see if we can catch us one of these flatboats loaded with evidence."

SANDS could feel almost elated at the way things were shaping up as he rode along Main Street. He was not overlooking the fact that he was riding closer to danger every moment. His youthful enthusiasm found no time to consider the hazards.

There were two saddlehorses at the hitchrack of the Cattlemen's Hotel. As he passed, Ringo Mason came down the steps, Nancy Burton beside him. Sands went cold inside. The girl had made it to town almighty quick—straight to Mason. Had she given away his secret? She hadn't promised to keep it. She was honorable, he knew; but, if she cared for the man—

Mason saw him and beckoned. Sands swerved his horse in to the hitchrack as they mounted. The girl, he saw, was nervous, preoccupied, deliberately avoiding his glance. Mason wore his best politician's smile; but Sands did not miss the cold threat in his porcelain eyes.

"I haven't seen you all day, Sheriff," Mason said. "There was a little job I wanted you to attend to, if you remember. Take care of it. Then stick around close. This is Saturday night, and the town will take some watching."

His mouth hard, Sands watched them ride off, knowing Mason was offering a last chance to release his housemen from jail. Wondering where Mason and the girl were heading, he went to his room in the hotel, washed up, and sat on the bed smoking. Just before dark, he went into the Palace Cafe, and took a stool beside Doc Ransome.

"How's Duncan?" he asked

"Startin' to mend," Doc answered, then bent closer. "You made a bad enemy there, son. Look out for trouble when he gets out. Him, Mason, and McCord was connivin' this mornin'."

Doc paid his bill and left, and the place was empty. When Sands had finished his meal, the waitress, who had shown open interest in him, came up. She leaned on the counter and smiled.

"You look like a nice kid," she said, low-voiced, "so I'm tipping you off. Ace McCord and some of his crowd just left. I overheard them mention your name. They didn't look nice when they said it. Watch your step, kid."

Sands grinned. "Thanks, Tess. If McCord pushes me, I'll deliver him to you for hash."

He stood for a moment outside the door, watching the lights flicker on along the street. He lifted his guns from their holsters, let them drop back, then swung into a lazy stride down the street, every sense alert.

Bawdy noises from the saloons already filled the street. A man stepped out of shadows ahead of him, hurried down into the Branding Iron. As Sands reached the door, a roar went up inside the saloon. He hitched his guns forward and brushed through the batwings.

A melee was in progress at one end of the smoke-filled room. Cursing, fighting men battered at each other over a fallen card-table. A single glance over the place brought a tightness to Sands' stomach—Mason's housemen were back at their stands!

Sands clubbed his guns and dived into the milling men. A knife flickered at him, and he knocked the man out with one clean punch. It seemed, then, as though the place had gone mad. Men who were fighting each other now turned on him, attempting by sheer weight to crush him to the floor. It was a trap—the man who had hurried into the saloon ahead of him had given the signal. Once beneath this mob, he was finished; no one could be blamed. It would be hushed as a regrettable accident.

Desperately, he fought free. His guns swung up, roared, and the lights went out.

HE DROPPED to the floor, then, as cursing men emptied their guns through doors and windows. Feet trampled him, and he winced with pain.

"Don't let nobody get out!" someone yelled.

He stood up, raising his voice, "Look out! There he goes through the back door!"

There was a roar of guns, and a concerted rush toward the back of the room. Sands ran, spinning as he hit the batwings. He was through into the street. He crossed it and ran between two buildings, aware that it was no longer safe for him to be seen on the streets. He cut through an alley, and entered the City Livery Stables by the back way. It took a mo-

ment to locate the stall holding his steeldust. Hurriedly he jerked the saddle off its peg and flung it aboard. He was in it and swinging out the back door, when the hostler came back to investigate the commotion. He heard the man shouting behind him.

Sands sped out of town. He was finished here. McCord, he supposed, had engineered the release of the jail inmates. It was a thing he should have anticipated.

He was turning down the rutty wagon-road that led into the granger colony, when he became aware of a rider pounding toward him in reckless haste. He brought the man up with a shout, and saw that it was the parson. As they swung their horses together, he could sense the man's excitement.

"Sheriff," he panted. "I was coming to warn you. We caught them—two of Mason's men—planting hides at the colony. One of them escaped."

Sands said sharply, "He'll go straight to Mason. You got those hides, of course. What brands were on them?"

"Mason's 7-Lazy-M, Burton's T-Bar-40, and two others I can't recall."

Sands said, "All right, this is it, friend. Mason will want to smother this before it leaks out. If my guess is right, he'll send his gunnies down to get that man you've got—and while he's at it, he'll wipe out the grangers to a man. We've got to move fast. Get back and warn them. I'll get Burton and his boys!"

IT WAS less than two hours before dark when Nancy Burton left the 7-Lazy-M and rode toward home. It had been a trial to convince Mason that she preferred to ride alone. The man's persistence and determination that she marry him at once had left her a little shaken. She could feel his strength of will almost having its way with her, yet she had managed to put him off again. If she had been uncertain about her feelings toward Mason before, now she was even more confused. Color flooded her clear cheeks at thought of Rawlin Sands. There was a steadiness of purpose, a frankness, about him that stirred her.

That afternoon she had pried the story of Sands' discovery and the shooting of Tate Clevis, from her father; she had even induced him to admit his suspicions of Ringo Mason. A sensible girl, she had realized she must try to allay those suspicions in her own mind for the sake of her future. She had purposely arranged this trip to Mason's ranch; she had employed every wile she knew to lead the man into admitting, or hinting, that he might be involved in cattle-rustling. Mason's acumen and shrewdness had left her fearful, now that he suspected her motive.

Once out of sight of the ranch house, she cut back through the hills toward the river, riding fast. She had time before dark, she thought, to cover the scant two miles of Mason's 7-Lazy-M that fronted on the river. If the man were really using barges to spirit rustled cattle away, the river was the logical spot to look for evidence.

The river here broke out of steep-walled canyon country onto flatter ground. The banks were sloping, spotted with thick clumps of willow. She rode carefully, avoiding soft areas that hinted at deadly quicksand. She was moving out of the willows onto higher clay banks when she saw the man. She reined in, reaching forward quickly to lay a hand over her horse's nose.

He had emerged suddenly from what appeared to be a trap-door in the ground some distance back from the river. Apparently absorbed in thought, he lowered the trap and disappeared into the high brush. She heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs as he rode away. Without hesitation she rode up and dismounted. She glanced around, listening, then examined the spot. The door, she saw, was dirt-covered, and perfectly blended with the terrain. A single tough, scrubby bush served as the handle.

She tried to pull it open, but it was either locked, or too heavy to budge. She slipped the loop of her rope around the bush and set her horse to the task. The door swung open, revealing pine boards on its underside. A steeply-inclined ladder led down into darkness.

The smell that assailed her nostrils as she gingerly descended set her heart thumping wildly—the strong, unmistakable odor of penned cattle! As her eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light admitted through the trap, she saw them. She understood, then, how right Rawlin Sands had been.

The room was rectangular, cut back into the river bank. It was sided and roofed with heavy planks, then re-covered with dirt to blend with the ground above. The end fronting on the river, she supposed, must be a door. The floor was not a floor, but a great flatboat, fitting snugly into a three-sided platform built around the walls, and resting on the river—literally a floating corral, high-railed, and so tightly packed with cattle that the animals could do little more than moan and roll their eyes. She bent close to the nearest animal's rump. It carried a distinct Burton T-Bar-40.

She had seen enough. She hurried up the ladder. Every move ahead of her was clear: she must tell her father, then go straight to Rawlin Sands. She had been grossly disillusioned; but she was in this, now, and she would see it through.

HALFWAY out, she heard sounds—riders coming through the brush, voices. She ducked back. But they had seen the open trap.

A shout went up, and they closed in with drawn guns. There was no escape, she knew. Chin tilted, shoulders back, she stepped out to face them, looking steadily at the big man mounted on a black horse.

She said contemptuously, "Well, Mister Mason, I've found what I came to look for. You're a very clever man."

Ringo Mason closed his mouth abruptly, staring. "Nancy! You crazy little fool—do you realize what this means?"

"Certainly," she retorted. "It means your finish here in this valley—an end to your filthy cattle-thieving!"

Mason smiled ruefully. Looking at this girl who dared to challenge him in the face of such odds, he could feel nothing but admiration, and regret that things could not have remained as they were. She had beauty, courage, everything that gratified his domineering, egotistical soul. He knew he had to have her at any cost.

"No," he said slowly, "it means you'll be implicated with me—you and your father. In my position, I can arrange that, of course—unless you marry me."

"And then?" she asked.

"Things will simply go on as they are, with no one the wiser—except that you and your father will share the profits."

She laughed mirthlessly. "You think I'd bargain with you, Ringo? Never! You're nothing but a scoundrel—a cheap, crooked politician!"

He said heatedly, "Our ambitious sheriff put you up to this snooping, I suppose. Well, it'll be the last of his meddling in my affairs. Lon Duncan told me this morning he's none other than Rawlin Sands—I was stupid not to recognize him that first morning. He's responsible for all this—he and those damned granger friends of his. I'm making a clean sweep of them tonight. As for your friend, Sands—my men have their orders to dispose of him."

Her hands clenched until the nails bit into her flesh. "You—murderer!"

She turned, quick as a deer, and raced for her horse. She heard Mason give an order; a rider spurred forward, and a rope settled about her waist, snapped tight, jerking her to the ground. She fought it fiercely.

Mason watched her, knowing she would never give up. He said curtly, "Get her horse, one of you. We can't have it trotting home empty-saddled. Then tie her up so she can't escape."

One of his riders growled, "She's more dangerous than Sands an' them grangers put together, boss. Ain't you goin' to fix her clock?"

Mason turned on the man savagely. "I'll take care of her personally. Understand me?"

He glanced impatiently the the sky, dark now with coming night and threat of a storm. "You two manning the barge: we're moving these cattle downriver tonight. Follow the usual instructions—and there's another little item I want you to take care of. Now listen carefully. If you botch it, don't come back!"

BESIDE the river it was pitch-dark, save for a ghostly glow from the masked windows of Ben Linsey's shack. Inside, the small room was hazy with tobacco-smoke, and crowded with cowmen and grangers. Nat Burton stood in the center of the room, gesticulating, his face flushed.

"By thunder, I'll comb this country," he blustered, "I'll turn every stone till I find that girl. I tell you, Sheriff, she left the ranch an hour after you did, without sayin' a word. Somethin's happened to her. I'm damned if I'll keep my boys here. Who in hell knows whether Mason will raid the place or not? We could be out lookin' for Nancy!"

Sands said, "Easy, Burton. Mason has to make his play tonight. Nothing else he can do. You stop worryin'. Stick here with Linsey and the parson to run this shebang—I'm goin' out and find Nancy."

Burton started to raise a loud protest, but a grim-faced cowman cut him short.

"Sheriff's right," the man declared. "He's lined this thing so's we've got somethin' definite on Mason. He's give us our chance to stop this rustlin' that's bleedin' the valley, Burton. We're goin' to see it through."

Burton glanced around at the determined faces of his cowmen friends and neighbors, then threw up both hands resignedly.

Ben Linsey, out of bed now and girded for war, clapped him on the back. "Hell, Burton," he said. "If anybody kin git your gal back, it's that fire-eatin' young sheriff. Git, Sheriff. We'll have Mason's gun-slingin' wolves skinned an' pegged out when you git back."

But Sands was already out into the black night. He ran straight to his steeldust, glancing at the darkened shacks of the grangers, wondering if they could hold against Mason's superior forces. That the girl was with Mason, he did not doubt. But where? He went cold with anxiety. "He can't have her, damn him!" he promised himself, and set heels to his horse.

To follow the river was the best way to Mason's place, he decided. A chill, rain-sweet wind struck his face, and intermittent lightning flashes disclosed the hills and the dark sheet of water flowing beside him. He put his trust in his horse, letting it pick its way along the intricacies of the bank.

Rain came with a sweeping gust of wind, stinging him with its sharpness. He reined in abruptly, staring through darkness toward the river; listening. From somewhere out

there had come the faint low moan of a steer—too close to have come from the far bank of the river. He saw it, then—a great black shape, moving ponderously with the slowly rolling current—the rustlers' barge, loaded with stolen cattle!

CHAPTER FIVE

River-Boat to Hell!

SANDS drag-reined his steeldust with a light pat on its wet nose, and slid down the bank, kicking off his boots. A lightning flash gave him an instant to judge distance. Without hesitation he plunged into the icy water, swimming strongly, and at an angle to intercept the slow-moving craft.

His guns dragged at him; but he would almost rather sink than part with them. There was the desperate risk of water-logged cartridges, he thought, of a misfire at the wrong moment; but he could chance it, for the short time he would be in the water.

His outstretched hand touched the rough planking, and he clawed for a hold, floundering until he could grip an upright. Cautiously he pulled himself aboard, the hot smell of cattle in his nostrils. There they were, a foot from him, packed to almost immovable tightness.

Clinging to the rail, he raised his eyes, made out the silhouettes of two men on a deck raised above the heads of the cattle. One man, he saw, steered the barge with a long pole slanting back into the river. It was so dark he could not tell which way the man's head was turned, and he feared a lightning flash might reveal his presence. He moved, crab-fashion, to the opposite end of the boat, and crouched there, shaking the water from his two big guns.

To gain the raised deck, he saw, meant crossing the backs of the cattle, risking a gouge from the maze of tossing horns. He balanced on the rail, placed a dripping socked foot on the nearest animal's back. He was halfway to the nearest upright when a steer bawled fearfully. Another took it up, and the sea of backs surged beneath him.

He heard a curse from the deck above, and a man's voice said, "Shut 'em up, Nick. We'll be passin' them granger shacks any minute now!"

Sands made a dash, caught the nearest upright, and ducked under the deck as a man's head poked over. He turned and struck upward with a gun-barrel. The man's head rolled loosely.

Sands was on the deck, then, in a bound, facing the steersman.

"Reach high and fast, mister," he snapped.

"What in—" the man gasped. Then, apparently aware this was an intruder, he suddenly charged.

Sands had misjudged the man's nearness in the darkness, and rain had made the deck slippery. The steersman's full weight struck him, knocked him down with a thump. He tried to club with his gun, but it slipped from his wet fingers.

The man was on top of him, pelting blows at his face. He gripped the man's clothing, kicked upward, and they slid from the deck. In mid-air, Sands twisted his opponent beneath him. As they landed on the backs of the cattle, the man screamed horribly and went limp. Sands jerked him free of the sharp horns, knowing he had missed the same fate by inches. Crazed by the smell of blood, the animals bawled and surged against the creaking rail. Fighting for a foothold on the slippery backs, Sands managed to get the dead man overside.

Gasping, he regained the deck, headed for the steering pole. Then he tripped and fell. He lay where he had fallen, grateful for that instant's rest, yet grudging it. The object he had fallen over emitted a muffled groan, struggled feebly. Sands sat up, staring. The man he had struck still lay at the edge of the deck. This, then, was someone else. . . . He reached and felt the warmth of a body, hard strands of rope. A vivid streak of lightning let him see, and then he was on his knees, tearing away the ropes and the gag, almost shouting in relief.

"Nancy! In heaven's name, how did you get here?"

THE girl sat up, clutching at him to make certain she saw aright. He was real, and the feel of his strong arm about her brought her strength. She told her story, then, breathlessly: how she had discovered the nest where Mason hid his ingenious rustling device; how he had caught her, put her aboard.

"He was shipping me to Holbrook," she said. "He was to come there for me—I think he had an idea he could win me over. He's strong, Rawlin, dangerous. He'll never give in until he's dead."

"We'll get him," Sands declared. "This will do it—he can't talk himself out of this!"

She clung to him. "We'll have to hurry, then. He's leaving tonight. But hold me just one minute, Rawlin, hold me until the fear goes away—I've been so terribly blind!"

A roar of gunfire from the shore brought them to their senses. Sands leaped to the tiller. Nancy was there beside him, and together they tooled the barge straight toward the splashes of powder-flame on the bank. It grounded deep in the soft silt with a jar that shook them to their knees. Sands spent a moment binding the unconscious rustler with the ropes that had held Nancy; another gathering up his fallen gun.

They ran ashore, then, braving the gunfire,

and made their way through the willows behind the granger shacks. Sands could not tell how the fight was going. He swallowed his anxiety, left the girl with a reassuring word, and ran toward the besieged shacks. Mason's men had entrenched, he saw, after that first surprise, and gunfire was sporadic—that would mean their horses were near. He floundered through mud and brush, bullets streaking uncomfortably close, searching for the animals.

He saw them then, their wet hides glistening as lightning blazoned the sky, and he pounced catlike upon the man standing guard, striking with his gun. There was no sound. He had the horses, the man's gunbelt, and was away like a wraith, grinning at a scheme that came to him. He buckled the gunbelt about the girl's waist, lifted her into the saddle.

"Ride straight to the main road," he ordered, "then toward town—I'll catch you." Before she could voice protest, he had slapped her horse away at a gallop.

He swung aboard his own mount, grateful to get his torn, aching feet off the ground. He drew his guns and looked to their loading. Then he charged—straight into the midst of the attackers' horses. Snorting, they scattered before him, and with a wild yell he followed them, straight down the line of gunfire from the brush—standing in the stirrups, shooting right and left at every powder-flash.

IT HAD the explosive effect of a cavalry charge. Mason's men broke cover and scurried, some dropping as his bullets caught them. His purpose accomplished, he swung sharply, and pounded up the muddy wagon-road between the rows of shacks.

"Burton! Linsey!" he shouted. "Bring your boys out and get 'em—they're on the run!"

He was gone, then, up the slope and out onto the main road, rain slapping at his face. He found the girl waiting for him on the outskirts of the town.

"We'll try the Sundust first," he said, and together they rode along the main street.

It was past midnight, yet the five saloons were still doing a land-office business. He realized vaguely this was Saturday night—tomorrow would be Sunday. He thought of his father's little church, so barbarously burned to the ground on this same night five years ago, and cold, nerveless anger settled over him.

At the Sundust's crowded hitchrack he swung down, lifted the girl from her saddle. He grasped her hand and led her up the steps, two at a time. He swept through the batwing doors into the sour, smoke-hazy brightness of the saloon.

A hush gripped the room. Mouths gaped as they crossed the floor; two drenched, bedraggled figures, leaving behind them a trail of mud and water. Without a glance to right or left, Sands headed straight for the door of Mason's private office. He had no thought of what he would do if Mason were not there. But Mason was—and so was Bart Shalley, and Ace McCord.

For a moment they froze in the attitudes in which he had caught them—McCord straddling a chair, Shalley at his desk, Ringo Mason crouching beside his big safe, stuffing currency into a traveling-bag.

Never once taking his eyes off the trio, Sands firmly pushed the girl out the door. "Hold 'em off my back," he said, and closed the door behind him.

He said softly, looking at Mason, "You saw her, Mason—is that enough to tell you you're finished?"

Sands stood now, legs slightly spread, thumbs hooked in his crossed gunbelts, his soaked, tattered clothes clinging to his lean young frame, his sandy hair plastered across his forehead. McCord's face was apoplectic. Shalley's rasping breath was the only sound.

"If that's not enough, Mason," Sands goaded, "Nat Burton and his friends and upward of fifty grangers are on their way here now. Your gunners ran into a little trouble tonight. And there's the barge you were shipping the girl out on, and the stolen cattle—and the hides your men planted—and if you want to go back five years, there's my father, Preacher Sands, and his church you burned, and this town—!"

RINGO MASON stood stiffly, the fingers of his right hand toying with the massive gold watch-chain. A sound penetrated the room: a distant shout, the thunder of hoofs.

Without a change of expression, Mason said, "He's all yours, Ace—get him!"

McCord catapulted from his chair, his gun streaking up, his shots like dynamite blasts within the room. But Sands was rolling to one side, his guns in his hands even before Mason had ceased speaking. His first shot crossed with McCord's, and he saw the foreman go down, a dark splotch on his forehead.

From a corner of his eye he saw Bart Shalley slinking to get behind him, tearing a button from his coat in frantic haste to get at his belly-gun. He cut a shot at the lawyer with his left-hand gun, and the man screamed and sprawled across the floor. He turned his guns on Mason, then—and caught the hammers before they fell. The big man had not moved; he stood as before, a thumb hooked through his watch-chain, a thin, rueful smile on his face.

"Damn you, Mason," Sands said, "why don't you draw?"

Mason shook his head sadly, "A good politician knows when he's licked, Sands. A pity we couldn't have patched things up without

all this—you and I could have gone far together, boy."

Sands heard the door open behind him, then, and Nancy was clinging to him, sobbing. He lifted a comforting arm about her, and for just that instant he was off guard.

Mason's big frame seemed suddenly to shrink. His right hand moved with incredible swiftness, stabbing forward, the heavy watch-chain sliding across his thumb. On the end of it was not a watch, but a snub-nosed derringer. It flipped into his big hand and exploded with a roar.

Sands thrust the girl from him, just as something struck him like the kick of a mule. He sagged against the wall. He saw Mason jerk out his shoulder-gun, then take a step forward, pointing the gun at arm's length straight at his head. It was like the man to wait, knowing the girl would come in; to make his play when everything seemed settled; it was like him now, to make sure of his man.

Sands saw death staring at him from the barrel of Mason's revolver, from the china-blue eyes behind it. With a terrible effort, he crooked his wrist upward, pulled the trigger of the gun in his hand. The weapon's recoil jerked it from his grasp; but Mason's arm was dropping. The man's big body was sagging, a look of surprise and frustration on his face.

HE WAS still in Ringo Mason's office when he came around. His head, he discovered, was pillowed in Nancy's lap, and she was bending over him, stroking his hair. When she saw his eyes open, she said, "You're going to be all right, Rawlin—the doctor just said so. I'm so terribly thankful."

The room was full of cowmen and grangers, he saw, and they were laughing and clapping each other on the back. Burton, Linsey and the parson came over. Ben Linsey without ceremony popped the neck of a whisky bottle into his mouth.

"Doc's orders, son," he pronounced. "No, don't say a word—jest take it easy. We know all about it. Parson Hazlit broke down an' told us you was Rawlin Sands, an' what you was tryin' to do. After that, we give you all the rope we could—an' you sure as he—er—" he became aware of Nancy—"shootin' strung up a lot o' coyotes with it. We're all right proud to welcome you home, son."

"And by unanimous consent," Nat Burton added, "you've been elected sheriff of Two-Mile City. You've made that law-badge you're wearin' really mean justice, young feller."

"Thanks, Burton. I'll take on the job," Sands said. "But I hate killin'. All I want is to see people get along." He looked at Parson Hazlit. "The air's clear in this town now, parson, and tomorrow's Sunday. How about holdin' church—and then stayin' here with us? We're goin' to rebuild the church, and we'll need a man like you to run it."

"I'll do that," the young parson said earnestly.

Nancy took Sands' face between her hands, and smiled down at him. It was not a hard face she saw now, but one full of hope and ambition. Her gray eyes were very bright, perhaps a little mischievous, as she said, "And I've always wanted a church wedding, Rawlin."

"What about a husband?" Sands grinned, and closed his eyes, content.

THE END

Boss of Hell's Own Spread!

Big Sam Flagg ran the toughest outfit in all Montana, and made it his boast that he could lick any of his hired hands with fists, guns, or bullwhips. . . . But it was up to young Boo, the broken-spirited, yaller-dog of the ranch, to give that hard-case cowman one lasting lesson in manhood!

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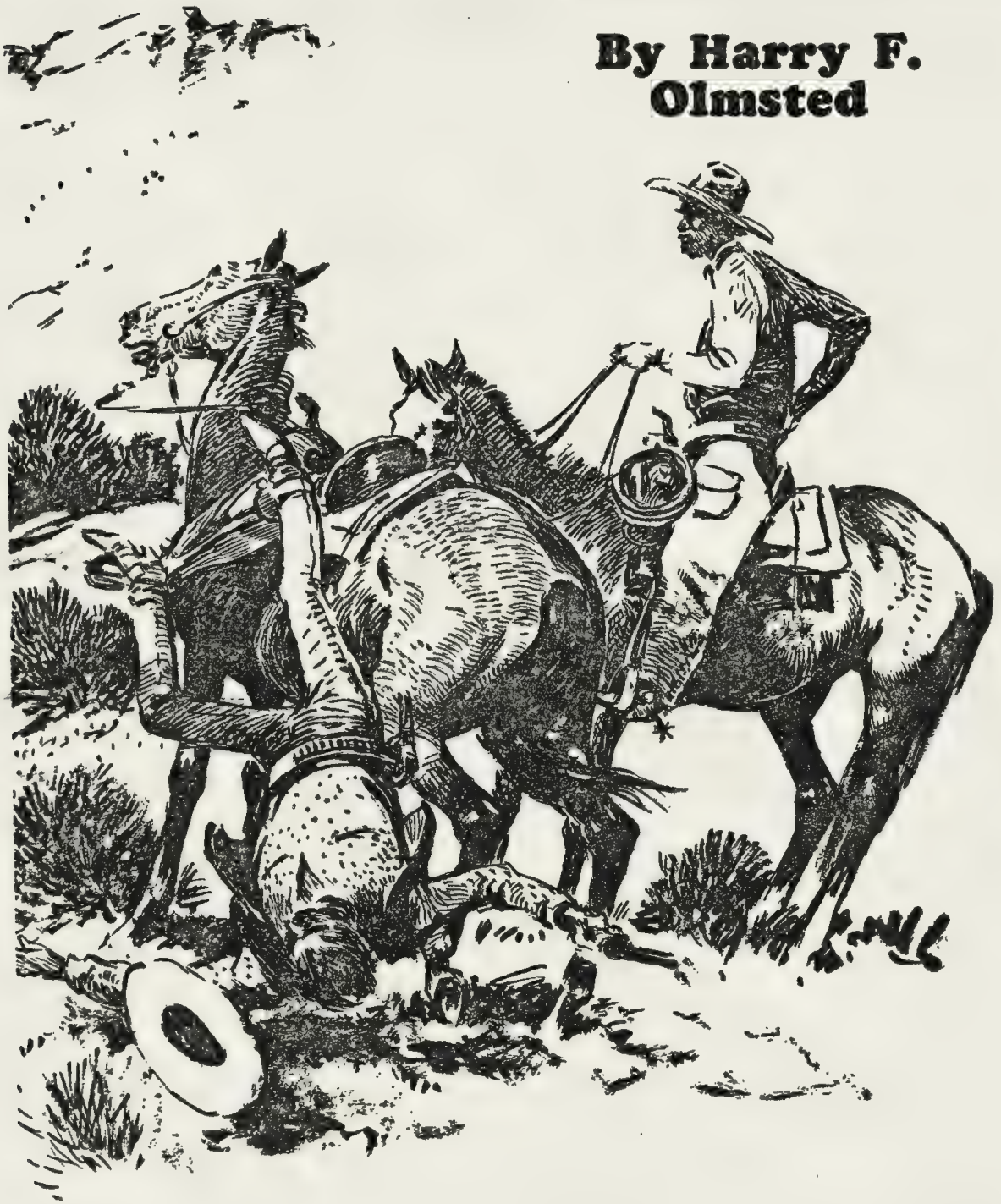
CHAPTER ONE

The Devil's Deadline

IN A SENSE, Hoss Greer could be identified with a principle he and other true cowmen detested—absenteeism in ranch ownership. This was true because of his many outfits rodded by foremen. But when Hoss chose a manager for one of his irons, he trusted him utterly, gave him free rein and unlimited backing, and would spit in the Devil's eye in supporting him.

What differentiated Hoss from most absentee owners was his quickness to jump when

By Harry F. Olmsted



trouble came to one of his outfit; a foreman's knowledge that Hoss would kill ponies to get to the scene, smoke out aggression—and punish it. Enemies came to understand this and to use it to lure him to his doom. Like the time he lost young Johnny Toll. . . .

That second letter from his Triangle K, up around Winship City, struck Hoss like the kick of a shod horse. He read it and then he read it again, letting its bitterness burn into his soul. It had come three weeks to the day after the letter from Johnny Toll, advising Hoss that he had sold two hundred head of Triangle K cows and heifers to the neighboring Anchor Bar and was enclosing cashier's check for ten thousand dollars, drawn by the Stockman's Bank in Winship. That had been fine, but this follow-up—

Mr. Greer:—Johnny Toll turns up missing and a couple of hundred beefs with him. Aint discovered yet how he got away with

them. I am rodding the outfit till you get another man, unless you want me to handle same permanent which I'll be glad to do at Johnny's old wages. Let me know right soon.

Yrs. truly,
Link Treadly

Hoss didn't answer this letter. To him, Link Treadly was just one of the Triangle boys—a thick-set, taciturn man, capable and dependable enough to have won from Foreman Johnny Toll the place as second in authority. Hoss needed a talk with this fellow before turning the outfit over to him. He would need time to think. This news had kicked the guts right out of him.

Hoss rode from Tres Alamos with little of his usual dash when trouble bugled. Not in a long time had anything affected him like Johnny Toll's defection. His mind leaped back ten years when the chubby, curly-haired, smiling kid had come to the D Dart, over Globe way, asking for something to eat and a riding job to earn it. His name, he had said, was Johnny Toll. He had run away from an orphan school where "they whip a feller just to see him squirm." He bared his shoulders to prove his words. He'd die, he said, before he'd go back. He wanted to learn cow work and horses, and he would work hard.

Hoss hired Johnny, and in ten years he had known not one regret. The kid had proved a natural. His burning ambition to become a good cowhand and to please his benefactor had won him a number of worth-while promotions —the last a foremanship of the important Triangle K. He had made good all the way. He had wanted for nothing. He had saved his money, had a nice account in the Stockman's Bank. Why would he, without a word or sign, suddenly turn to rustling and throw away his future?

Hoss had never set out on a punitive excursion with greater distaste or less outrage. He had, he admitted now, come to love Johnny like a son.

ARRIVING at the Triangle K, old Hoss found no enlightenment. "That morning," Link Treadly told him, "Johnny taken Pate an' Skeeter an' drove a batch o' beefs out of Panther Pocket, hazed 'em up the mountain to the ridge. Then he sent the boys down Cherry, lookin' for bogged stuff. Said the trail to Bloody Angle, where he figgered to graze them two hundred-odd head, was in a gulch all the way an' he could handle 'em. That's the last we seen of him, Mister Greer."

"How soon did you go to look for him, Treadly?"

"When he never come home that night, we went after him, bright an' early. Nary a sign of him could we find. Nor the stuff he was drivin'. He'd bin worried about somethin' fer some time. I figger he'd planned it long in advance."

Hoss made a good listener that evening and at breakfast next morning. He learned nothing from the words of the crew and dismissed their nervousness as being due to his presence among them. He liked the business-like way Treadly organized the men for the day's activities and got them away, but he still didn't like the man himself.

Hoss refused Treadly's invitation to ride with him and look over the Bloody Angle district, professing saddle-soreness and his desire to transact some business in town. When the last of the cowboys had gone, Hoss went to the cook-shack for a bit of palaver with old Chalk-eye Bundy, the cook. "Chalk-eye," he said, handing the stove-up ancient a flask he had fetched from Tres Alamos, "you an' me are doin' a little light drinkin' while you tell me what happened to Johnny. Huh?"

Chalk-eye, who had worked for Hoss on and off for thirty years, bared snaggy teeth in a grin, took the flask and killed a half-pint in four gulps, wiped the neck on a greasy shirt-sleeve and handed it back. Long a top cowboy, the years had caught up with him and cut him into the canners. He walked with a limp, relic of a pitch-poling fall down a shale slide. His chalk eye was blind, the sight taken when a pony had smashed him into an overhanging, thorny mesquite. He carried lead here and there in his stringy carcass. He was crabbed and a bad man to drive, but whisky mellowed him and he respected Hoss.

"I don't know no more about where Johnny is than you do, Hoss," he said. "But I'll bet all I got comin' agin' a sack o' Bull that he didn't run off with no cattle."

"If there was any sort of trouble around here, Chalk-eye! If I hadn't neighbored with the Anchor Bar for years, I'd be suspicious of them two hundred head of breeders we sold 'em. But that old skin game was played out, long ago. What else coulda happened to Johnny?"

"Well . . ." Chalk-eye ground off a bait of twist. "His horse coulda piled him. A wormy bull mighta horned him. A man might get the belly miseries an' die where he fell, or the Apaches might go on the path, sorta secret, an' take his hair."

Hoss drank and handed the flask to the old-timer, who killed it. He was silent for a few moments, then: "Like I told you, Hoss, I don't know. But, stove up as I am, my eyes an' ears is still good. I look at this here Link feller an' I can't see him fer dust. Somethin' tickles the hairs in my ear an' I get the idea the Anchor Bar is pennin' some critters fer shippin' today. If I owned this spread, I'd have a look at them beefs."

"Think I will, Chalk-eye. Thanks." Hoss stretched and went out to saddle his horse. Chalk-eye hadn't really told him anything, yet somehow the old cowdog had lightened Hoss' spirits immensely.

The road from the Triangle K to Winship City was straight as a gunsight—two hours away at a hand canter. Hoss scorned this easy way, taking a half-circle along the toe of the Drawn Bow Hills. That meant a thirty-mile ride across the range of the sprawling Anchor Bar. A wide-awake man could see a lot in thirty miles, count a lot of vented Triangle K's. If those he counted, added to those in the Winship City loading pens, tallied to more than two hundred. . . .

Hoss taunted himself for so much as holding the hope. No cow outfit would dare use a trick as moldy as that one, let alone Old Tom Paysinger. The Anchor Bar boss was a good cowman and an honest one.

At the line fence, where Hoss let himself through the gate, he sat his saddle for long moments, staring at a freshly painted sign nailed to the fence post.

NOTICE
Trespass at your own Risk!
This means You!
KEEP OUT!

Old Tom, thought Hoss, *must have turned cantankerous.* He was chuckling as he led his horse through the gate and closed it after him. Trespass, eh? Like hell! What was the range coming to?

Hoss rode a many-angled course, scrutinizing one feeding band of cattle after another. Mostly, they wore the Anchor Bar, but here and there Hoss spotted a vented Triangle K, or a vented HP Connected—Harper Panfrary's outfit, in Sundog Valley. He had tallied forty-seven of the two hundred Johnny had sold Anchor Bar when he topped the invisible divide and saw the ranch buildings and their tall poplars, in their pretty setting at Big Cienega, off to his left. And two riders spurring fiercely toward him, a full half-mile away.

Hoss met those riders where he dropped into Big Box Gulch to make a crossing. They came purposefully, jumping their ponies off the rim onto a talus and stiff-legging them to the bottom with high-held reins. They separated as they approached—a bull-necked, whisky-veined man on Hoss' left, grinning fiercely, a frosty, funereal man on the right, his deep-set black eyes glittering like a rattler's.

Hoss, chill and deadly, watched them come on. Trespass, in his book, was no great crime. But with this pair it was; Hoss could read it in their manner. He knew their kind—two-bit gunmen paid fighting money and free cartridges, given free rein and full assurance of legal protection. Coyotes. They'd go pretty far, even to the point of nipping at the heels of a wolf. As for a lone, grizzled mossyhorn crossing their range. . . .

Bull-neck curbed cruelly. "Where you think you're goin', feller? Can't you read? Don't you know you're trespassin'? Don't set there gawkin'! Talk up an' talk fast, or I'll drag you off that bronc an' knock your ears down!"

TINY fires danced in Hoss' colorless eyes. "I can read," he confessed. "An' I saw your purty store sign. But I know Tom Paysinger pretty well, an'—"

"Paysinger ain't got nothin' to do with this outfit. The Norizona Cattle Company don't like trespassers. Where you headed?"

"Winship City."

"From where?"

"Triangle K."

They snapped glances, those gunmen, openly scoffing. "Don't give us that," snarled the frosty one. "You're here spyin' for something; what is it?"

"What would it be?" asked Hoss, weary of fencing.

Bull-neck lifted his brows. "Now we're gettin' somewhere. You ridin' for the Triangle?"

"I own it," said Hoss.

He could see them start, stare and grow convinced. "Boy, oh boy!" chortled Bull-neck. "Are we ever in luck, Frosty. Brother Greer, we're takin' you to the boss-man. He'd never forgive us for cheatin' him outa makin' beef of you. Git started for the ranch!"

Hoss sneered, never taking his interest wholly from Frosty, the more dangerous of the pair. "You boys has jumped the wrong maverick. Nobody's ever sawed my horns, branded my hide or whittled on my ears. Nobody's ever goin' to."

"No?" hummed Frosty. "Well, if that's the way he feels about it, Beefy, we better go back to the ranch an' tell the boss—" He swung his hand toward the ranch and brought it back in a swift upscooping of his smoke-wagon.

Hoss had read him right and was ready for him. His blazing gun spoke an instant before Frosty's, whose slug was wasted. Hoss' bullet took the funereal killer center, dumped him beneath the heels of his plunging pony. Beefy, far behind, came out with his piece and had it knocked from his hand as Hoss' second slug tunneled his heavy forearm. Hoss could have killed him as easily.

"Go tell your boss," said Hoss, icily, "that folks around here don't like the word trespass. 'Tain't neighborly. Tell him we'll play the game any way he wants it. Now git!"

Beefy, white with pain and fear, jabbed in the spurs and roared away down the gulch.

Hardly had his hoof-echoes stilled than others sounded, and Link Treadly and another Triangle rider drew rein at the rim. Their eyes bugged.

"Cripes!" breathed Treadly. "We saw you from the ridge, Mister Greer, an' rode to head you off. This outfit's touchy as hell. Had to kill that feller, eh? That's bad."

"No," said Hoss, reining up the gully toward a slide that led out. "That's good. Payoff maybe. If these fellers talked to Johnny Toll like they talked to me, they'd have had to kill him, which they likely done."

"Oh, I don't think so, Mister Greer."

"Don't, eh? What you think, Treadly, don't mean a damn thing. I aim to know. You two fellers come with me; we're ridin' to town."

They crossed and rode with him, but plainly against their wills. All the way to Winship, Link Treadly spoke not one word. He was sulky and bitterly resentful of the slight. Skeeter Cole, the other puncher, tried to be cheerful. But his nervousness as they approached Winship didn't escape Hoss. Both men eyed him unhappily as he led the way to the loading pens, where the Anchor Bar was shoving beef critters onto the cars. Hoss dismounted, climbed to the top corral rail and made a mental tally.

Mad as a hornet, he looked up the Anchor Bar foreman. "You can cut out them Triangle K vents," he snapped, "or I'm cutting them out for you!"

"That's a man's job," grinned the Norizona ramrod. "After a man's size fight."

"That's what Beefy said," murmured Hoss, tight-lipped. "He's buzzard bait."

It stiffened the Anchor Bar man. And while he hesitated, Link and Skeeter came up. "We heard what you said, Mister Greer," said Link, "an' it's too raw for our stummicks. When we steal, it'll have to be after dark. These are the critters your precious Johnny Toll sold, whether you got the money or not. We're quittin'."

"I thought you would," said Hoss. "Good riddance. I'm raisin' an outfit an' cuttin' every vented Triangle critter here—"

"You're raising your hands, Hoss Greer," snapped a voice, "or I'm blowing your head off!"

Hoss turned, and looked into the twin barrels of the sheriff's scattergun.

CHAPTER TWO

Powdersmoke Prisoner

OLD HOSS sat in the sheriff's office, speechless with futile rage, watching the grim administrator of the law book him for the murder of one George Patchett.

"All that you've said may be true, Greer," said the lawman, "but the facts hardly bear you out. The only witness to the killing says that you were trespassing and shot without warning when they ordered you off the Anchor Bar. However that may be, I am only the sheriff, carrying out the orders of the judge who issued the warrant."

"Warrant? Who swore it out?"

"The manager of the Norizona Cattle Company—a rich and powerful outfit." Sheriff Jeff Oglesby made a period, stuck the pen in a cup of shot. "If ever you needed help and counsel, Greer, you need it now. Anything I can do for you? Anybody you want notified—a lawyer mebbe?"

Hoss thought of his lawyers in Phoenix, put them instantly from his mind. They were civil counselors only. Matthew Kibbe, who had represented him in earlier criminal actions, was dead these three years. "Who's the best criminal lawyer in town, Sheriff?"

"John Stockwell, Greer. But he's retained by Norizona—at a fat yearly salary."

"Don't that tell you anything, Sheriff? Why would an honest cow outfit have a criminal lawyer hired, unless they expected trouble with their neighbors, trouble they aim to start? Who else can I get?"

"Prentiss, Connel and Stivers are good lawyers, but they don't take any murder cases. And anyway they're workin' for Norizona. That leaves Peter Impost—Winship City's horrible example."

"Bad, eh?"

"Good enough lawyer, I reckon, if he ever got sober. I'd hate to have my life hanging on his defense. But on the other hand, I doubt if any good criminal lawyer will take your case. He'd consider it lost before he started."

Hoss knew he was right. He knew, too, the habit of Arizona communities to rush justice with long spurs. At least, this drunken Peter Impost could exhaust every possible legal delay while search was made for a capable lawyer to defend him. "Send Impost in," he growled and went back with the sheriff to the dingy block of four cells.

About an hour later Hoss heard gales of laughter sweeping along the street. He climbed onto his cot and glanced out the small barred window. Sheriff Oglesby was angling across the street toward the jail. Beside him was a scarecrow in faded black broadcloth, who reeled as he walked. And Hoss suspected, from the look of him, that the man's unsteadiness was more from the weakness of starvation than whisky giddiness.

They came into the jail together and the sheriff said, "Greer, this is Lawyer Impost." He opened the cell.

"Casewell Peter Impost," said the lawyer, in a whisky voice. "Mister Greer, it is my

good fortune to meet you." He laid a moth-eaten silk hat on the cot and started as the door clicked shut behind him. "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows, if we are to believe the immortal bard."

"To hell with the immortal bard," snapped Hoss. "See what you can do toward getting me out of here on bail."

"You'll need more than a lawyer for that, Greer," chuckled Sheriff Oglesby. "Murder ain't bailable in this county."

"Ah-h-h, murder." Impost rolled his eyes, sat down on the cot with the heaviness of one at the end of his strength. He was painfully thin and he smelled of whisky. His clothes were as threadbare and frayed as the scuffed briefcase under his arm. "You have slain a man of strong connections. There is work cut out for us, my friend. I will need—er—a slight token of good faith, a—er—modest retainer—"

Hoss dug out a twenty-dollar bill and was shocked at the tears that came into the man's eyes as he clutched it and murmured his thanks. Impost, seeming to believe an apology called for, murmured, "You see a wretched soul, sir, bruised with adversity."

"Never heard of that brand o' likker," said Hoss, sourly. "When you come tomorrow, try to be halfway sober, will you?"

"Sober?" Impost drew himself up. "Ah, yes. I am flattered, Mister Greer. Life is a stage and all its people actors. Indeed, if my own life were played upon a stage, I should condemn it as an impossible fiction." He rubbed his lapels, pressed one forward for Hoss to smell. "Priceless juice, it is better spilt thus than swallowed when my part is yet to be played."

He laid the ragged briefcase on his bony knees, unbuckled it and peeked inside. Then he laid it beside Hoss, on the blanket. "In here," he said, whispering hoarsely, "are newspaper clippings to entertain you, a blank to fill out with the facts of the killing and, most important, that which makes a virtue of necessity. But mind you—" he wagged a skinny finger in Hoss' face—"do not be hasty. Wisely and slow—he stumbles who runs fast."

A MOMENT later the sheriff had let him out and they had left the cell block. Disgusted and disheartened, Hoss glanced into the briefcase. As lightning changes the riven tree, so that look changed Hoss, changed disgust to admiration, pessimism to a robust hope. "That which makes a virtue of necessity" was a six-full Colt .45, and a good one. Here was a lawyer after old Hoss' heart. In thus telling him that legal forms were a mockery, Impost had spoken a language Hoss understood. The cowman whisked the gun to his waistband and pocketed the dozen or more loose loads.

Afterward, much relieved, Hoss stretched out on the cot and ran over the news clippings. One gave the details of a jail-break, wherein a prisoner of doubtful guilt somehow secured a gun, forced the sheriff to release him and so escaped a lynch crew by a matter of twenty minutes.

Another clipping contained an account of how a Texas cow outfit bought cattle from another spread, vented the brand and used the well-advertised purchase as a leverage to clean out the seller, who could not segregate the rustled cattle from those he had taken money for.

A third, and the most interesting to Hoss, related how one Milton J. Brazzard, from Marfa, Texas, had come to Winship City, bought the Anchor Bar from Thomas Paysinger, organized the Norizona Cattle Company and hoped to make his mark on the cultural and social life of the community.

So that was it. The no-trespass signs. The timeworn vent-brand steal. The disappearance of Johnny Toll. Their gunplay at him, at the bottom of Big Box Gulch. He remembered the delight of those two killers when he revealed his identity. The more he thought of it, the clearer it all became. Brazzard had deliberately moved to make Hoss come to him—as he had long ago promised.

Time had been when Milt Brazzard was a crooked cattle buyer, with a smooth line of talk and a smoother draw. That was down around Pima, where Hoss ran cattle under the Spectacle iron, some fifteen years ago. Brazzard had tried some of his high-flying finance on Hoss and, when he was called, had chosen to bolster his honor with bullets instead of money.

He had killed three men in the previous nine months and his growing rep was going

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to his head. But he hit the ground that day, and his honor went unavenged. He was six months getting around, and his withered right arm would forever remind him of his departed gun-rep, and the futility of his threats against Hoss Greer.

He's killed Johnny Toll, thought Hoss, bitterly; *he's killed that fine young cowman just to get at me. By all the little gods, he'll wish he hadn't muffed his first chance.*

Dusk was creeping in, so Hoss put the clippings in the briefcase and tossed it under the cot. Presently the door clanged and Sheriff Oglesby came in with Hoss' supper. He'd had a couple of drinks and was feeling funny. "Well, Greer," he greeted, "how you like your new lawyer? Quite a fancy word-spitter, ain't he? Trouble is, you can't get a jury around here that won't know him for the damned old barfly he is."

"I'm well satisfied, Sheriff. Impost may fool you an' a lot of other people before this is over." Hoss uncovered the tray and fell to eating under the lawman's amused eyes. "I wonder if I can talk any sense into you, Oglesby. Suppose you could be shown that Milt Brazzard bought Triangle K cattle just to be better able to rustle my cattle, kill my foreman and draw me into a gun-trap."

The sheriff smiled. "A neat defense, Greer. I didn't give Impost enough credit. A strong charge, but damned hard to prove."

"Not too hard, if we had a sheriff who'd get out of his rockin' chair long enough to tally the Triangle K vents under Anchor Bar fence. I can prove we sold him two hundred —no more."

Hoss drained his coffee cup, pushed the tray away. Oglesby picked it up, scowling with hurt dignity. "I take your slur unkindly, Greer. I won't make no such tally, because I believe you are misinformed. I have it from Brazzard that Johnny Toll sold him a half-dozen such batches of cattle before he lit out for places unknown. You trusted that young feller too far, Greer."

"I aim to prove you a liar before this is done," snapped Hoss. He stretched out on the cot, indicating the talk was at an end. Sheriff Oglesby quit the cell, muttering angrily—and Hoss cursed his own evil temper.

HOSS had jerked off his boots and crawled under the blanket when he heard the night marshal relieve the sheriff and bid him good night. Less than five minutes later someone came into the jailhouse and said, peremptorily: "Fetch a light, Frank. I want a look at the prisoner."

Hoss knew who it was; he had expected Brazzard before this. The fact that the man had waited until Sheriff Oglesby was gone argued that the lawman was not under this crook's domination. Once again Hoss regretted his failure to treat Jeff Oglesby with more respect.

Hoss lay there like a man asleep, watching the light crawl along the floor, listening to the approach of boots. Grateful for Lawyer Impost's thoughtfulness, Hoss had committed himself to the man's injunction: "wisely and slow." But now he was painfully conscious of the gun pressing into his side. His excitement rose like the mercury column in a Phoenix thermometer. If he could feign sleep and get them inside the cell, then truly this was the moment the pistol had been built for. The truth lay buried deep in Brazzard's carcass. It could be wrung out.

He heard them pause, felt the impact of their stares. He heard Brazzard's low, "Hoss!" Then a louder: "Hoss Greer!" Hoss snored softly. A third and louder call from Brazzard, with the marshal drawing his keys across the bars.

"He sleeps like a dead man," said the night marshal.

"More like a possum, Frank. Go fetch me a pail of water; I'll show you what I mean."

Old Hoss snorted and sat up, blinking. "Brazzard!" he said, affecting surprise. "I thought I smelled skunk."

The Anchor Bar boss smiled with no especial rancor. "You smell a coffin, Hoss, and you're nearer to having a lid screwed over you than you may think. My boys had orders to rub you out, but I'm as well satisfied this way. I'll stand by and watch them fit a noose to your neck, Hoss. You'll strangle and your face will grow black and the last sight you'll have on this earth will be me laughing at you, holding up this arm shattered as you shattered Beefy's this afternoon, as you've maimed dozens of others."

"You tell a mean bedtime story, Brazzard. I like the part where you admit ordering your men to beef me. That's the way it happened to Johnny Toll, no?"

"Identical, Hoss, only that one didn't backfire. Johnny was commencing to get nosy about the brands inside my fences. He had to go. Never knew what hit him, Hoss."

Old Hoss leveled his finger at the night marshal. "I call on you to witness that Brazzard confesses to these crimes."

"Eh?" The lawman bared buck teeth in a grin, cupped a hand behind his ear. "What was it you said, feller? I'm deafer'n a hitchbar."

Hoss fought back his rage. "I'm right glad," he sighed, "that Sheriff Oglesby decided to listen in on what was said in here tonight. That cooks your goose, Brazzard."

Brazzard's taunting smile faded, gave way to a cold deadliness. He was a tall and handsome fellow, well formed save for the withered

right hand which he now rubbed with a rasping sound. "Frank," he said. "Greer don't know it, but he just condemned the sheriff to death. Come on; we can't take any chances with this." He flung Hoss an ugly glance. "Day after tomorrow morning you'll have your day in court, Greer. It won't take longer. There will be no delay; I've been promised that. Tomorrow they start work on the gallows. Inside a week, you'll have paid in full." He turned on his heel and led the way out.

CHAPTER THREE

Four Men For Boothill

THE following morning nobody came near the jail until close to noon. Old Hoss chafed and fumed. He was already to vent his spleen when Sheriff Oglesby showed up, but one look at the man silenced him. Oglesby's head was swathed with bandages and the eyes that peered out at Hoss were bloodshot and heavy with pain.

"Chink's coming over with your breakfast, Greer," he said weakly. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it. Never even thought of you."

"What happened, Oglesby?"

"Bullet," said the lawman, laconically. "God knows why I'm alive, I don't. I was sittin' beside my readin' lamp last night when somebody shot at me through the window. Raked my skull an' knocked me cold for four hours. It was that close."

"Who done it?"

Oglesby shrugged. "I can't imagine. Far as I know, I haven't an enemy in the world."

"One," said Hoss. "The enemy of any man who's right an' decent." He told of last night's visit, taking responsibility for the chance remark that had turned the hand of Milt Brazzard against the lawman. "After all he confessed," he wound up, "he couldn't chance letting you live. I'm surprised he didn't foller up an' make dead sure."

"I—I can't believe it," muttered the sheriff. "Especially about Frank Cooney, the marshal. Why, Greer, I made that boy, gave him every chance he ever had."

"I'm gettin' tired of this jail," said Hoss. "Go arrest Brazzard an' throw him in here with me. After I get through makin' him squeal, you'll have your hangin', but I won't be elected. Nab him before he can do any more harm!"

Oglesby shook his head. "Can't do that, Greer. You got too many reasons for cookin' up such a story. Even if I believed you, what would your word be worth in the court? I'd have to have more'n that to ever arrest Brazzard." He turned sadly out of the cell block, deaf to Hoss' biting sarcasm.

The Chinese came with the tray, but Hoss' appetite had passed. He sent the food back, pacing the cell and loudly damning a lawyer who wouldn't come near his client. From the office where he nursed a throbbing head, Jeff Oglesby called irritably. "Shut up that cussin', Greer. It's your own fault. You gave that drunkard money an' he had himself a celebration last night. He's likely drunker'n a Piute, sleepin' it off. . . . Well, I'm damned; here he comes now."

Hoss heard the door slam and the rasp of the lawyer's voice. "Ah, Sheriff, I have heard of your misfortune. Some unprincipled devil has put his quarrel upon you, to test your valor. Just as in the case of my worthy client."

"You may not find your client so worthy, Impost, after waiting all morning to see you. Get in there and see him."

"Out of my lean and low ability," sighed the lawyer, "I'll lend him something."

He came reeling into the cell block, carefully closing the door behind him. At the cell door he hung on the bars and regarded Hoss with a bloodshot and owlish stare. A dreadful depression was deviling him. Hoss, having known other drunkards, understood. "I know," he said. "You spent the money for booze an' want some more. Well, you'll get nary a cent till you prove you're doing something about my case. . . ."

He fell silent, noting a strange change in the derelict. He straightened. His vacuous look became one of grimness. Eyes, wherein Hoss had seen tears yesterday, took on a fierce brilliance. Impost drew a wad of bills from his pocket, certainly the larger part of what Hoss had given him.

"I made it a point, Mister Greer, to visit most of the saloons last night, take one drink and buy a pint here and there. You see, I have a part to play, as I told you yesterday. I have played it, bravely I may say, for courage mounteth upon occasion. But now I come to you, beside myself, at my wit's end. Our joust, yours and mine, is not now with a misunderstanding law, but with death—umpire of men's miseries."

"Impost," said Hoss, severely, "I'm hearin' you through a fog of beautiful words. But what in hell are you trying to say—in plain United States?"

"Forgive me," sighed the lawyer. "I read much of the immortal Shakespeare and find his words so much more robust than my own. Listen well, Mister Greer. To you, I am a stranger. To me, you are an old and tried and trusted friend. For years I have admiringly watched you father a homeless boy and build him into a proven man. Now they say Johnny Toll is foully murdered—"

"I'd bet on it, Impost."

The lawyer glanced nervously toward the door. "And you would lose," he whispered.

"They shot him from his horse and left him for the vultures. Somehow he called his animal and dragged himself astride and rode, clinging to his saddle horn. At an hour when most men sleep and drunkards indulge their vice, I heard him drop in the alley. If that be not God's miracle, then what?"

HOSS bounded to the bars, gripped his skinny arm. "What you tryin' to tell me? That Johnny's alive?"

"Hush, friend. The walls have ears and they watch my every move since I dared the lightning by taking your case. If they should suspect. . . . God, they may be in my rooms now! But what difference whether he die from a new bullet or the bloody one that remains in his body? His hours are numbered unless I call in the doctor—"

"You haven't had a doctor for Johnny? Why you damned—"

"Easy, Greer. I dared not call a doctor. One hint that Johnny hadn't died where they shot him would spell his doom. But now—"

He cut off as the door-knob rattled. The panel swung open and Chalk-eye Bundy, the Triangle K cook, came timidly in. At sight of Hoss, he grinned. "H'are yuh, boss? Link rid out fer his warbag an' told us you was in jail. Thought mebbe you needed something worse'n them waddies need grub, so I come on in. Let one of the varmints git away, eh?" He patted his holstered gun. "Wisht I'd been along an' he wouldn't of."

"You are along, Chalk-eye," said Hoss. "This is Lawyer Impost. Go with him to his rooms an' set guard over Johnny Toll. Yes, he's alive, but he won't be long if we don't get a medico to work on him. An' if Brazzard's spies see a doctor goin' up to Impost's rooms, they'll want to know why. You know what to do if they come up there?"

Chalk-eye's good orb glittered and a fierce smile twisted his wide mouth. "I never thought I'd live to do again what I'll do if they make a play at Johnny, Hoss. What we waitin' for?"

Impatiently, he moved out into the sheriff's office, chuckling as he looked to the action of his battered old hogleg. Impost lingered to reach for Hoss' hand through the bars. There was a wistful gentleness in his eyes. "Thanks, good friend, on behalf of Johnny's father, God rest his ashes. I knew him better than any other man, I guess."

"Don't josh me," said Hoss. "From the moment you said you'd watched me father Johnny for years, I figgered you was his real dad."

"Hush—please!" Impost flung a terrified glance toward the sheriff's office. "Never say that, Mister Greer. Ah, I confess it's true, but nobody must know, least of all Johnny, that I am Henry Peter Toll. My accursed thirst was a great trial to Johnny's mother. Maybe I did contribute to her death, as they claimed. But certainly I was punished when they said I was unfit to rear Johnny, and put him in an orphan's home."

"I know how you felt," murmured Hoss. "I felt that way myself when I thought they'd killed him. A great boy, Johnny. One you can be proud of."

Impost seemed not to hear him. "When he escaped from the orphanage—and who am I to say I didn't contribute somewhat to that event?—I followed close, watching over him like a hen with a lone chick, helping him over the rougher bumps, shielding him always from the shame of a drunkard father. He knows me as a pitiable derelict whose trail seems to run strangely parallel to his own. Wherever you sent him, there followed I, feeling pride in that remote part of me where the suckle of pride is not dried up. You see the hell I have suffered, being unable to help him when he needed help most. But I waste time. I will take the doctor up."

"I'll see you there tonight," said Hoss, and watched him move unsteadily away.

THE afternoon had been hot and quiet and endless, with Hoss fretting and pacing his cell. Out in the sheriff's office, Jeff Oglesby shifted restlessly in his squeaky chair, snored intermittently and softly cursed his pounding head. A dozen times or more, Hoss gave impatience free rein and made the decision to call the sheriff in, throw down on him and march him up to where Johnny Toll lay dying—maybe dead. Each time he compromised, climbed onto the cot and stared across lots at the second story where a lettered window proclaimed:

CASEWELL PETER IMPOST
Attorney at Law

There were a thousand questions running through his mind, and they were all futile. Once he saw Impost hurry down the outside staircase and enter the drugstore. And when he had rushed back a few minutes later, signs of life came to a sleepy, long-coupled gunnie who held up one of the Imperial Saloon's awning posts. He lifted his hand to somebody Hoss couldn't see and bowlegged into the barroom. A minute later he came out with Link Treadly, erstwhile segundo of Hoss' Triangle K. Hurrying, they jingled along the walk and passed from Hoss' sight.

The sun sank behind the Drawn Bow Hills. The fresh smell of evening came into the cell, bringing coolness and the promise of night. Hoss heard Frank Cooney, the night marshal, come in and greet the sheriff. "How you feelin', Jeff? Your eyes look like burnt holes in a

blanket. Listen, I'll go get supper now so you can go home to bed. Be right back."

"That's good of you, Frank," said Oglesby. "While you're there, tell Wong to send Greer's supper right over."

"Sure thing." Cooney went out, slamming the door.

Ten minutes dragged past, and the Chinese came with the tray. The sheriff sent him back and brought Hoss' supper into the cell. Hoss ate without relish. He caught the misery in the sheriff's face, offered him the coffee cup. "Drink this, Oglesby. You're going to need it before the night's out."

"What do you mean, Greer?"

"This!" Hoss whipped out Impost's pistol. "I think you're a white man, Jeff, but mulish around the ears an' mebbe too trusting of those who ain't fit to live. If I have to beat it into your sore skull with this gun-barrel, you're due to absorb some truth tonight."

"Impost fetched you that gun, Greer!"

"You've got an idea there, Sheriff, even if it's hard to prove. How you gonna look at this, sensible or ranicky?"

A slow chuckle shook Jeff Oglesby. "You can put up the smoke, Greer. I've bin settin' out there all afternoon, figgerin' how I could put it up to you to make a swap—each of us helpin' the other out of the jam he's in. You beat me to it."

"What's your trouble?"

"They tried last night, Greer, an' now they know they failed. They'll move again tonight, I'm sure. Either here, at my house or somewhere in between. At sixty, I'm too young to die."

"Twenty years too young, Jeff. Now with two old heads like ours—" They sat there talking while purple dusk settled over Winship City. Frank Cooney was taking a long time at his supper, and Hoss remarked on it.

"He's waiting for darkness, Hoss, to make sure I'm doin' as I said. I just can't believe that he's the one to do it."

"It'll all come out in the wash, Jeff. Now get my gun an' unlock the back door. Then get set in your chair."

THE stars were fully out and the afterglow had faded to a thin line in the west when Frank Cooney returned to the jailhouse. Sheriff Oglesby was a huddled shape in the swivel chair, hat in his lap, cocked gun under the hat.

"Look here, Jeff," said Cooney. "No use you stayin' here. I'll look after things. You go home an' crawl into bed—you need the rest."

"Can't 'rest," mumbled the sheriff. "Not with this head poundin' the way it is. 'Druther be settin' up. You go along; I'll just set here."

Cooney grunted. "Of all the stubborn—" He turned to go out the open door. A figure stood before him, barring his exit with a leveled pistol. "Who's that?"

"H'ist the dew-claws, Cooney," snapped Hoss. "One peep outa you will be your last. Up with 'em!"

"Greer!" rapped the night marshal. "How the hell did you get out? Oglesby, you're in on this, you—" He fell silent as Hoss jabbed the gun in his belly and emptied his holster. Cooney emitted a squawk and grappled with Hoss. "You ain't gettin' away with this, you damned old goat!"

Hoss' arm rose and fell. He caught the pole-axed night marshal as he wilted, dragged him to the swivel chair the sheriff had vacated. Working swiftly, the cowman and the sheriff tied the unconscious man there, gagged him, wrapped a towel about his head to simulate a bandage and jammed the sheriff's hat on his head. Some of the sheriff's saddle blankets were rolled and placed under the blanket on Hoss' cell cot.

"Wisht we had another of the varmints to put here instead of a dummy," growled old Hoss. "Shame to waste good bullets on innocent saddle blankets."

"Wonder what-all this night's going to bring," mused Oglesby. "Listen, if they's somebody layin' for me at the house, mebbe you better let him stew in his juice. Pretty risky walkin' up there, knowin' he's bushed."

"I'll take it easy, Jeff. Now rip off that bandage, put on Cooney's white hat an' slip up to Impost's rooms. I'll be along directly."

Oglesby left the jail by the rear door and Hoss wrapped the bloody bandage loosely about his head. A few minutes later, affecting the sheriff's stoop of shoulder, he approached the house where Oglesby kept bachelor quarters. The place was dark. The pallid stars offered little hope of spotting the lurking killer, if indeed one was posted.

Hoss moved still and easy toward the break in the Osage-apple hedge, from which the walk led to the door. Common caution told him he belonged with Johnny now, rather than here—sticking his bill into a trap set for Jeff Oglesby. Yet even as he had the thought, mists coiled before his vision; mists writhing with the shades of old comrades, friends, saddle partners. Men long dead—a whosty phalanx riding up the bright avenue of the newly-risen moon's first rays, brave-eyed, laughing-lipped, just as they had died in the fight against intolerance and injustice.

All men, thought Hoss, are called to join the fight for decency and freedom. Some answered; some begged off. Was he any less a man than those proudly parading shadows in the moonglow? Hoss smiled, turned through the break in the hedge. Ten steps to the front door. He had covered five when the voice

spoke from the dark hedge just behind him.

"Turn around, Jeff!"

It drove a gust of breath from Hoss' lungs. The man could have shot him in the back, but he had elected to give him at least the semblance of a chance. It was little enough for a crouched and ready assassin to offer, but enough for Hoss. He stooped, drew, spun and fired, all in one coordinated motion.

Gunflame licked out at him, but he neither felt nor heard the bullet. From the hedge the killer shouted up a great cry. The sound emptied and faded away and the stink of powdersmoke stung Hoss' nostrils. He heard the slow, bubbly guttering of the man's breath and the rustling of weak movements on the ground. Hoss stood like a statue, his weapon cocked and waiting for a finishing shot.

Silence fell upon the hedge and Hoss went forward cautiously. His toe touched the killer's body. He bent to shake him and had his answer in limp shapelessness which could not be feigned. Hoss straightened, listening. The street was echoing to the pound of boots—two pairs, moving swiftly toward him. Hoss was reloading as he faded into the darkness. *They'll find the body,* he thought, *but they won't find Jeff. Then they'll head for the jail for a double killing. From the moment Brazzard turned to murder, he's drawed only losin's. Tonight he draws another—his last.*

HOSS circled wide and he came to the building that housed Lawyer Impost's offices. Moving like a wraith to the foot of the outside staircase, he flung a look up and down the street. Horses were banked at the Imperial rack. On the walk men were frozen in a knot, listening, expectant, staring toward Sheriff Oglesby's house. Hoss went silently up the stairs, unobserved.

The landing gave to a dark hallway. Light struck across a threshold, and Hoss walked in. The place smelled of ether and antiseptics. Sheriff Oglesby sat in one chair, old Chalk-eye Bundy in the other. On a small table stood the four pint flasks of whisky the lawyer had bought on his rounds the night before. They were untouched. Through a closed door came the drone of the medico.

"A few drops more ether on that cone, Impost—another suture—now bandage—there! You're pale, man. Get out into the air and breathe deep. I don't want you on my hands. I'll clean up here."

The door opened and Hoss had a glimpse of Johnny Toll lying on a table, as white as death. At that, he wasn't any paler than Impost, who was fairly green around the gills. Hoss had the cork out of a flask, well knowing the need of this man who had steeled himself against his curse until he was trembly, sick and weak. Impost snatched the flask and almost drained it. Instantly its effect was noticeable.

"Ah-h-h," he sighed, rolling his eyes. "Sweet, sweet juice of the corn. As Old Omar said: 'I wonder what barkeeps buy, one half so sweet as the goods they sell.' "

The sheriff got up and polished off the flask. His eyes were on Hoss questioningly. "You—found everything all right at the house, Greer?"

"Peaceful as death, Oglesby," said Hoss, "now."

The lawman nodded and went back to his chair, as if his legs were weak. "I have no doubt we'll hear more about this soon. When I came up, there was a man across the street, watching. I only hope I made him think I was Cooney."

"He spotted me comin' up," said Chalk-eye, "an' hightailed it right down to the Imperial, where the Anchor Bar an' all its friends is drinkin'. Brazzard—" He canted his head, listening. "Hark!"

An echoing burst of gunfire, muffled by walls, rolled through the town. There was a momentary silence, broken by the slamming of doors as men came to the street to listen. Then another burst of firing, followed by excited yells and the pound of boots along the walks.

"Poor Frank," mourned the sheriff.

"Poor dummy," grunted Hoss, caustically.

Silence gripped them. In the kitchen, Doc Carraway was rattling around, cleaning up. Presently he opened the door and came out, carrying his black bag. His eyes were circled and his face drawn with strain.

"Let him stay where he is," he said, "for a half-hour or so. Then get him into bed. Handle him carefully and examine him every fifteen minutes for three or four hours—for bleeding. When he comes out of the ether, give him two of these pills. Then he should sleep. He's strong and healthy and ought to live. If he seems worse, call me. Good night, gentlemen."

He took his leave and closed the door behind him. They heard his footsteps in the hall, and then the building was shaking as men came tramping up the staircase. A harsh voice said, "It's the Doc!"

The medico said, "Gentlemen, let me pass. I am very tired, and—"

"You been working on somebody, Doc!" That was Brazzard. "Who is it?"

"I've taken a bullet out of John Toll. Now, if you'll unhand me—"

"Go on home, Doc," ordered Brazzard. "Follow me, boys! The hangtree's just aching for that rustler's body."

A mirthless grin was hovering about Hoss' lips as he moved over to Peter Impost and handed him the briefcase pistol. "Thanks,

feller. In about a minute you'll know why you have to use it."

The lawyer nodded. Whisky was working in him and twin spots of color touched his lank cheeks. He nodded. "As the bard wrote: 'Every why hath its wherefore. We'll pluck a crow together, good friends. This is the beginning of my end, but I will follow thee to the last gasp, with truth and loyalty.' "

THE door burst open and Milt Brazzard surged into the room, a tide of men behind him. Brazzard plowed to a halt. He saw the one-orbed Chalk-eye and dejected Sheriff Oglesby sitting like two old maids with their knitting. He saw cadaverous Lawyer Impost barring the way into the kitchen, holding a Colt as if he were afraid it would bite him. He saw a gray and meek-looking Hoss Greer, leaning against the stand as if for support. Four sorry-looking men who had burned far down the candles of their years.

"Stand aside!" he commanded, loudly. "We're taking that rustling son to the tree! Boys, blast down the first man to make a pass at his gun." His glance shifted to Impost and hung there. "You can drop the pistol or use it, counselor. The choice to me is slight." His left hand, long trained to replace a smitten right, went to his gun-butt.

Hoss snorted. "Just as if you wouldn't gun us down if we obeyed you to the letter, Milt. We wasn't borned yestidday. If you want through that door, it'll cost you. How strong you willin' to go?"

Fifteen years ago Brazzard's draw had been too slow. It was now. Hoss' Colt shook the room with its deafening roar. Lead lifted Brazzard off the floor, hurled him back and knocked him down. His gun was in his fist and he was trying to raise it as he died.

Chalk-eye's hand was gun-full and flaming. Sheriff Oglesby unlimbered just as he might have reached for his pipe and sat there, firing. The gentle face of Peter Impost changed to a mask of hate and defiance as he leveled his piece and pulled trigger. He couldn't miss, and neither could Link Treadly, the renegade Triangle K segundo. Treadly's bullet drove the lawyer back against the door, smashing his chest like a sledgehammer blow. Limply he sat down, struggling to keep his sixgun leveled.

Treadly shifted to Hoss, whose bullet took him in the throat, severing the jugular. He fell, sprawling. In five seconds, five men had died. The rest of the Anchor Bar crew, still outside the entrance, dazed with fear, bolted for the staircase. And Chalk-eye, who had long ago abandoned all hope of warming his cold iron, was renewing his youth as he gave chase. Hoss heard the roar of the old-timer's weapon as he went over to kneel beside Peter Impost.

His blood, and Hoss figured he couldn't have much, was staining a great patch of his shirt-front. Hoss laid his hand there as if to stanch the flow. "How is it, Pete?"

Impost smiled. "You—you called me Pete," he murmured. "I'm proud. The wound? As good Mercutio said: 'It is not as deep as a well nor wide as a church door, yet it will serve. They have made worm's meat of me."

"Gonna let your boy outdo you, Pete?"

"What manner of father would wish himself greater than his son," he whispered, and his hand found Hoss'. "He—he must never know, Mister Greer. Promise—"

Hoss had no need to promise, for death had struck that room for the sixth time. The cowman stood up. "What matter if they laugh at a man who can die like that? The hardest thing I'll have to do, Sheriff, is not to tell Johnny what kind of a man his dad really was."

Oglesby's eyes were wide. "He—he's Johnny Toll's father?"

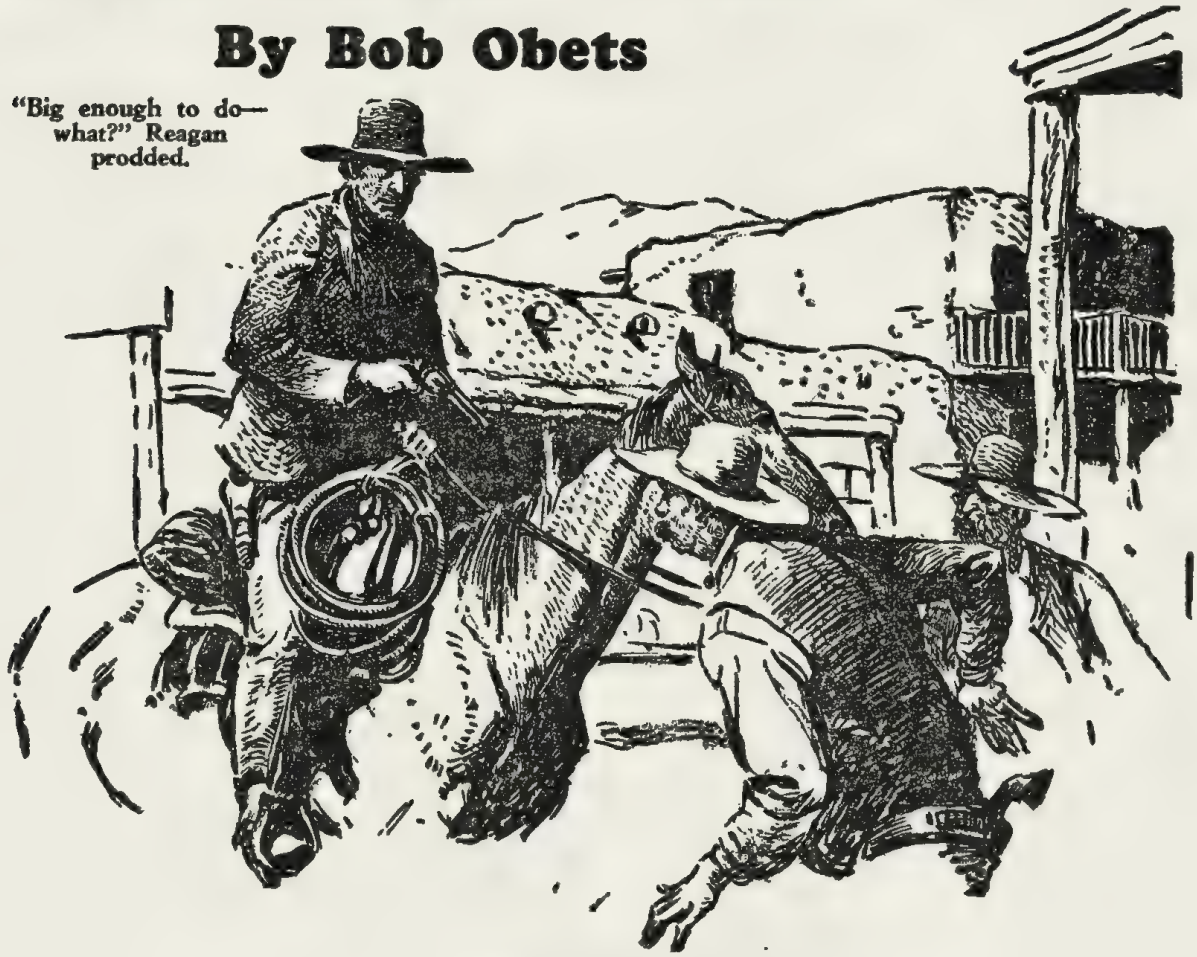
"Henry Peter Toll," said Hoss. "And your lips, like mine, are sealed. Eh, Jeff?"

Oglesby nodded and their hands met, sealing their common bond of silence. And Old Hoss heard martial music again and saw that silent parade of ghosts wreathed in the hanging wisps of gunsmoke. Another valiant had joined that crusading host, and his place was toward the front.

THE END

• YOU CAN'T RIDE HOME AGAIN

By Bob Obets



"Big enough to do—what?" Reagan prodded.

A Star Short Story

THE ROPE was an ordinary saddle rope, its whiskers worn away by much use; its leather hondo made a snug fit under the dead man's ear. To the dust-covered rider on the gaunt horse, riding toward that gruesome, swinging figure, it was like riding back through ten years of time.

He reined up beneath the ancient live-oak that once more served as hangtree, and his eyes, very bleak and gray against the dark-burned somberness of his face, watched the stiffened body slowly turn in the breeze.

He waited, entirely still, and knew that nothing could surprise him. The dead face turning toward him couldn't be the face of Lefty Bassett. But if that morning, ten years ago, could be lived again and this *were* Lefty Bassett, he knew that his reactions would be a lot different.

Pace Justin, Jim Tabor and the rest, had held their brief court under this same old live-oak—the Settlement Tree—while hemmed in by the circle of ranchmen's horses, three young buckaroos kept lips tight-locked and tried not to look scared.

Pete Justin, Pace Justin's son, and Boone Reagan were seventeen then. Lefty Bassett was a bit older. It was he who had sold them on the gun-running idea.

"Old Yeargen's so stingy, it won't hurt to

There was no returning to San Blas for Boone Reagan, except to the same waiting hangnoose he had long ago fled.... Yet, in dying, he might prevent another friendless, hunted youngster from riding the same tragic and bloody trail.

borrow the guns and ammunition from his store. That bandit across the Rio will pay double, with *mucho gracias*. We slip part of the money back in the Mercantile, and nobody's hurt . . ."

No, nobody was to be hurt. That's what Lefty Bassett kept telling them when they put the noose around his neck.

"We never meant no harm, Mr. Justin, my God, your boy was in it, too! How'd we know old Russ Boyd was sleepin' in back of the store? He began yellin', wavin' a gun. Spooked me—"

"Russ Boyd's gun was in his saddle pocket," Pace Justin cut in coldly. "You killed an unarmed man. An old man, at that, Bassett. You have anything else to say?"

"I didn't mean to! Justin, listen!"

Pace Justin nodded. Jim Tabor slapped the hip of Bassett's horse, and the saddle was emptied.

Again Justin nodded, spurs touched flanks and, without a word being spoken, the grim ranchmen rode with their prisoners to the county line. There, young Pete almost broke.

"Dad! You don't— Boone and I never—!"

"No, you didn't kill Russ Boyd. Lefty Bassett beat you to it. I doubt if you've got it in you to draw down on a man. You're just a common thief. Almighty God! I'd rather see you dead. I'd rather see you kill. Anything but a damn' cowardly thief!"

"Dad, you don't understand! We aimed to pay Yeargen! I—"

"You're a thief," Pace Justin repeated gruffly. "I'll give the both of you one piece of advice. Go a long way from here. Get a man's job. Make honest names. Maybe in five years this country will forget."

"Five years, hell!" Boone Reagan cried. "Come on, Pete, let's ride! To hell with this country! To hell with all of them!"

That had been ten years ago. And a lot of muddy and sometimes bloody water had flowed in the old Rio Grande. Pete Justin and Boone Reagan had ridden hard, dangerous ways, and always together. McNelly's Rangers knew them, and the Red Raiders of Juan Cortinas. They had, on occasion, thrown their lead for and against either side. Free-lancers, selling their fast guns, loyal to the outfit that paid their hire.

It wasn't anything to be proud of, but that's what they were. Gunhands. Bitterness and homesickness had driven them to it, and once started, with the bite of gunpowder in their blood, there was no turning back.

But many nights Reagan had seen Pete Justin move away from the campfire, to stand staring at the night. Reagan never questioned him. He didn't need to. He knew what Pete was thinking, for he had the same thoughts himself . . .

Bits of news from home . . . Pace Justin and Jim Tabor still were the big men of the country, but a newcomer, Mark Santell, was giving them trouble. Pete's sister, Judith, was helping old Pace run the PJ. Judith had never married, but there was some talk about her and Sunny Tabor. . . .

Just scraps of news. But those were some of the things Pete was thinking about. And of how the old PJ ranch house looked as you topped the black-brush ridge; of how it felt to ride over the range at dawn, with the curly mesquite damp under a good horse's hoofs, and not expect some gunnie to take a shot at you from any convenient brushy draw. . . .

And now Pete was dead and Boone Reagan was doing a thing he had told himself he never would—riding back to San Blas.

HE LEFT the dead man hanging. Through the violent years, he had seen too many dead men in too many places to find any interest in an unknown corpse. As familiar adobes came in sight, he found himself thinking about the warm brown eyes of Judith Justin.

He came opposite an adobe, newer than the rest, and saw a big man, rawboned but paunchy against the door-jamb, watching him with concealed interest. From the star the man wore, Reagan took him to be Mark Santell's sheriff, Rob Kelly. Reagan reined up.

Without turning his head, the big sheriff called, "Joe Tom! 'Nother gent to check his guns. Damn your hocks, come get 'em."

Reagan's right eyebrow lifted a trifle. He had worn those black-butted guns for more years than he cared to remember, had slept with them, and he had no intention of parting with them now. Not even for a little while.

Joe Tom, a bandy-legged little sparrow, ducked past the sheriff, and his glance flicked up at Reagan, bright and wicked. Reagan's hand came from his pocket, tossed a dollar.

"For your wasted effort," he murmured.

Joe Tom deftly snagged the flipped coin. His mouth opened, snapped shut, then he catstepped to one side and stood watching the sheriff.

"Like that, huh?" the sheriff grunted. "Stranger, the law in San Blas says you got to check them guns. I'm the law, and I'm big enough to—"

Without warning, his heavy face starting to grin, the sheriff jumped clear of the doorway. His palm slapped gun-butt—then fell away. His face puckered with an amazement so intense that it made him seem about to cry.

"Big enough to do—what?" Reagan prodded.

"You tricked me!" Rob Kelly declared hoarsely. With a cautious hand he brought out a bandana, mopped his face and took a

deep breath. Then he tried a grin. "Put it up, stranger. Put it back in leather. Rob Kelly knows when he's beat."

Reagan, unsmiling, slid the gun back in its holster.

"Now that's agreed on," he said, "you might pass this word to Mark Santell. Tell him I got his letter. Tell him my price is exactly double what he offered. I'll be at the Border Saloon for the next half-hour."

Reagan touched spur to the sorrel. He rode slowly past the familiar buildings, and was faintly surprised that they could bring back so many memories.

There on the corner was Yeargen's Mercantile; adjoining it, the saddle shop where his now dead uncle, who had raised him, had bought Reagan's first man-sized rig. Down that side street was the schoolhouse. Judith Justin sat next a window, and the afternoon sun struck red glints from her hair. . . .

Reagan left his horse at the livery stable and walked on past the barber shop, the feed store, and the narrow stairs that led upward to old Doc Mabry's office. This was Saturday and men moved along the walk; buckboards and ranch wagons and riders stirred the white caliche dust of the street.

Reagan saw several familiar faces, but not one of the men seemed to recognize him. He supposed he had changed a lot. From the alert, guarded glances he drew, he judged that most of the change had been for the worst. He wondered if Judith Justin would remember him.

ALMOST to the corner, he quit the walk and was in the street moving across to the Border Saloon, when a buckboard pulled by a team of fast matched bays whirled off the side street and went by so close to him that dust sprayed his boots.

The young woman driving the bays gave Reagan one quick, almost startled glance, then was past him, leaving with him the memory of the warmest, brownest pair of eyes he had seen in ten years.

He took another step, his thought still following the girl. He failed to see the rider round the corner, but the hammering of hoofs warned him and he took a quick step backward. The rider brushed by him and went thundering on after the buckboard, standing in the stirrups and shouting, "Judith! Judith, hold on!"

Reagan exclaimed softly, "Reckless damn' redhead, even grinned about it!" and went on across to the saloon.

He was at the end of the bar, alone, his whiskey untasted before him, when he saw the redhead step through the doorway.

Something kept tugging at Reagan's mind; he knew he should recognize the red-haired puncher. But what difference did it make? Reagan downed his whisky, and felt the bite of it clear to his toes.

"I'd admire to buy another—sort of square it for my horse jumpin' you outa your boots!"

Reagan turned, saw the redhead grinning at him. The redhead's glance flicked to Reagan's heavy guns, and he added, "Or—maybe I would. You work for Mark Santell?"

Reagan never answered, for at that moment the big bulk of Sheriff Kelly filled the doorway.

"Oh-oh," the redhead murmured. "Going to be some fun!"

His words were followed by a bellow from the sheriff. "Tabor! Hand over that gun I see bulgin' your brush jumper. You know the law! Not checkin' that will cost you ten bucks!"

Tabor! The almost-forgotten incident came alive in Reagan's mind. Two boys fighting on the creek bank; the husky one knocking the skinny, freckled one flat, only to have the skinny kid scramble up and wade in for more. That red-topped scrapper was Jim Tabor's kid, Sunny. Reagan, riding home with Judith Justin, had stopped the fight.

But that was ten years ago. That was before Jim Tabor and Pace Justin had run two erring youngsters out of the country, embittering their lives, starting them on the gun-trail. That was before Pace Justin sent his own son, Pete, out to meet a gunsmoke death. . . .

"If it's gonna cost me anyhow, Sheriff," Sunny Tabor was drawling, "then I better get my money's worth. That is, if you're bound to have it that I'm wearin' a gun. Me, I say this is nothin' but a old—"

"You can't lie out of it!" the sheriff shouted him down, his face beginning to redden. "Here!"

With surprising speed, the sheriff clamped an arm around Sunny's shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. The sheriff's right hand came from under the brush jacket.

"So you wasn't packin' a gun! What do you call this, Tabor?"

REAGAN, who had stepped to one side, heard a man behind him making a choking noise, then burst out laughing. The whole crowd, even those marked by openly worn guns as Mark Santell's men, began laughing.

Sheriff Kelly, alone, saw no humor in the situation. He glanced at the object his hand had found in Sunny Tabor's hip pocket. And at that moment, belatedly, Sunny murmured, "What do I call it? Why, Sheriff, anyone knows what that is. That's a old cow horn I picked up."

"Damn you, Tabor!"

The sheriff threw the cow horn from him, violently. His hand slammed against Sunny

Tabor's chest, shoved—and all the laughing ceased.

For Sunny Tabor, stumbling backward from the sheriff's push, brought up against the hard body of Boone Reagan. By sheer accident, Sunny's hand touched the butt of one of Reagan's guns, and when Sunny straightened the gun was in his hand. His usually friendly eyes were the chill blue of a Texas sky before a norther.

"Go ahead, Kelly. Pull that gun. No man can shove me that way. You and Santell and the hired killers you call cowhands have been tryin' too much shovin'. Shovin' our stock and Pace Justin's into Mexico. . . . Yeah, Kelly, you're a bunch of plain damn' thieves! You thought you had us bluffed, but I'm callin' your bluff right now. Pull your gun!"

Rob Kelly, with his gun half out of leather, hesitated. Gun-strapped men were edging up beside him, ready to back his play. Sunny Tabor stood alone.

"Pull your gun, Kelly!"

Reagan watching him, remembered the freckled kid, hitting the ground and coming up for more.

The dangerous one now, Reagan thought, was that slim dark fellow, half screened by Rob Kelly. His eyes, like black velvet, were a killer's eyes, with a spark far back in them that grew brighter and brighter. That was the tip-off. There was the move. The brown hand striking downward in a blur of speed. . . .

A quick stride took Reagan close enough. His hand chopped down, hard. Its edge struck the muscles of Sunny Tabor's out-thrust forearm with all the paralyzing force of a hatchet-blow.

A sharp sound of pain escaped Sunny's lips and his numbed arm sagged so that he almost dropped the gun. Then Reagan had secured the weapon, and again Rob Kelly was bellowing.

"Take him, men! Use your boots! Cave his damn' ribs in!"

IT DIDN'T last long and it wasn't pretty. Kelly's four men rushed. A fist smashed into Sunny's face, slammed him to one side. A hard-swung gun-barrel missed his head, crashed down on his shoulder and drove him to his knees. He was still striking out with his fists when the gun-barrel, swung for the second time, caught the side of his head.

Reagan heard an onlooker curse harshly. But not one of them offered to help Sunny Tabor. Rob Kelly was leaping forward, intending to use his boots on the dazed and bloody young warrior who, on hands and knees, was trying to get up from the floor.

Reagan started forward, then stopped, watching with eyes suddenly alert the tall well-groomed man in black coat, string tie and flat-crowned hat who was moving with purposeful strides toward Rob Kelly.

"Stop it, Rob! Yancey—Mexico John! Haul the young punk to jail. You heard me. Jump!"

They hauled Sunny Tabor to his feet. He shook his head to clear it, and his pain-blurred gaze came to rest on Boone Reagan. His battered frame straightened and the contempt that flamed through him poured from his eyes.

"And I offered to buy you a drink! Figured you for a decent sort. But I place you now. Once, when I was a button, you pulled Pokey Britt off of me. I reckon that was the last decent thing you ever did—before you robbed Yeargen's store. Shot old Russ Boyd. You damn' thief, you wasn't wanted here then and you're not wanted now! I'm telling you, you'd better leave town, because I don't want you around. I don't want Judith to see you, remindin' her of Pete."

Ten years ago, come hell or a blue norther, Boone Reagan would have felt honor-bound to accept that challenge. Now, with the hard eyes of Rob Kelly, Mark Santell and his gun-hands curiously watching him, Reagan gave no sign that he had heard. His voice, when he spoke, was almost gentle.

"You're too young, Sunny Tabor, to know all it can mean when once you pull a gun on a lawman. Someday, maybe, you'll know what I mean. I hope you never do."

Reagan stared at the younger man for a somber moment. Then Rob Kelly growled an order, and two of the men hustled Sunny toward the door.

"Book him for resistin' an officer," Kelly called for them. "I'll figure out the other charges later!"

Mark Santell's brilliant eyes were staring at Reagan.

"I was in the door, Reagan, when you took the gun away from young Tabor. I like the way you work. So, Mister, you're working for me, and to hell with what it costs! It looks like this is the break I've been waiting for, to prod Tabor and Pace Justin into an open fight. Before it's over, I'll have every cow they own!"

"They're your terms," Reagan told him. "It might cost you plenty."

At that moment a young cowhand, red of face, short of breath and sweating, burst through the door, yelling.

"Mr. Santell! One o' your gun—one o' your riders. One they call Macarte. Somebody done hung him higher'n a crow's nest, to that old Settlement live-oak! He's plumb daid!"

"That does it," Santell said softly, and his voice held a sibilant note that reminded Reagan of a knife or a gun whispering as it came from leather. "Macarte was my rider, and

Tabor and Justin hung him. Maybe the charge against young Justin will be murder! All right, Rob, let's ride."

REAGAN didn't go with them to bring back the body of the man called Macarte. Instead, he went to the Cross S Hotel, rid his hands, face and clothes of enough trail-dust to fill one of his boots, then spent another fifteen minutes cleaning his guns. That chore finished, his mind turned toward beefsteak and French fries, and he wondered if the steaks at Joe Humphrey's Hitching Rack were as thick and juicy as he remembered them.

He was at the door, his hand closing it behind him, when he heard someone coming up the hall, almost running. He saw a young woman in a blue dress, her shoulders square under a leather jacket, stop at the door of the adjoining room. She rapped angrily.

"Judge!" she called. "Judge Peyton!"

She rapped on the panel several times, and when she turned away Reagan was waiting. He had his hat in his hand, his dark hair was freshly combed, and he hoped that it was her surprise at seeing a man so unexpectedly, rather than anything forbidding in his appearance, that made her give such a start.

"I—excuse me. Didn't mean to scare you, but—" He stopped. He saw her lips part, saw the sudden warmth that brightened her eyes. "So you do remember me!"

"Boone! Boone Reagan! I thought today — in the buckboard — but then I knew it couldn't be you. Is—where is Pete? Boone, is Pete all right?"

Reagan's eyes turned somber. It came to him, all in a flash, why he had returned to San Blas. It wasn't because of Mark Santell, or the money Santell might pay for a pair of fast guns. It was because Pete Justin had been his friend, the one real friend he owned in the world. Pete had loved this sister of his, and she had loved Pete. So Reagan thought that the least he could do was to tell her what he knew concerning Pete's death.

But now, with Judith watching him, waiting, Reagan couldn't tell her the truth. It would hurt her too much.

"Pete's in Mexico," he said. "Last time I saw him, I'll bet the old rannihan weighed two hundred pounds."

And that, he thought grimly, was true enough. Pete was in Mexico—under a pile of rock in a shallow arroyo. If you counted the lead he was packing, he probably did weigh two hundred pounds.

"I'm glad!" she cried. "And I'm glad you're home, Boone. That old trouble, it's over and forgotten. Dad wrote letters, tried to find Pete. Boone, why didn't Pete come with you? Why—?"

She stopped, listening. Down on the street the hoofs of a bunch of horses beat up the dust. The frail, erect figure of Judge Allie Peyton came up the stairs, wearily.

"Judge!" The girl ran to meet him. "You've heard about Sunny? What can we do?"

"Your father and Jim Tabor just rode in," the judge said tiredly. "Santell's men are gathering. Sunny was foolish to pull that joke on Rob Kelly. That gave Kelly the excuse he wanted. Now, with that fellow Macarte found hanging to the Settlement Tree, no telling what will happen. But no matter. This thing had to come to a head, and this is it."

"But they beat Sunny so terribly! Surely the law—"

"You don't understand, girl." The old voice went bitter. "The law in San Blas is Mark Santell. Santell's next move will be to charge Sunny with murder for helping to hang Macarte. He will have supporting evidence, of course. But Sunny is only a pawn Santell is using to bring a showdown with your father and Jim Tabor."

With his hand behind him, on the knob of his door, the old judge added gently, "There is nothing you can do, girl. Nothing much that any of us can do. I thought, when they made me county judge. . . . "

His words trailed off. His gaze brushed past Boone Reagan without seeing him, and he went inside his room and shut the door.

Judith started down the hallway, and Reagan heard her say fiercely, "We're not whipped! We'll fight!"

Reagan found himself moving after her, down the stairs and across the hotel porch, and he was at her shoulder when she reached the walk. They met Jim Tabor and Pace Justin in front of the hotel, moving up the walk with purposeful strides.

"Judge Peyton says Santell is the law!" the girl greeted them hotly. "Dad! Are we going to let—"

"Step over here, Judith," Pace Justin cut in harshly. His puckered blue eyes, cold with contempt, stared at Boone Reagan. "I don't like the company you're with."

"Dad, this is Boone Reagan! Don't you remember? He's not a Santell man."

"I remember," said Justin. "And Jim and me just talked to Sunny. He had the drop on Rob Kelly. Things might have been different. But this—cheap thief knocked Sunny's gun down. Then he stood back and watched them kick and beat an unarmed man. He's one of them!"

"I don't believe it!" Judith gasped.

This girl, a few minutes ago, had brought Boone Reagan a feeling of warmth, of happiness such as he had not known in ten years.

Now, despite Justin's harsh words, Reagan found himself holding onto that warmth stubbornly.

Then Judith stepped over beside her father, and turned, and Reagan saw her eyes. He saw all the scorn and contempt they held, and the brief happy feeling died.

PAST JUSTIN'S shoulder, Reagan saw a spring wagon go by, carrying what must be Macarte's body, covered by a wagon sheet. Mark Santell and Rob Kelly swung their horses in at the hitchrail which skirted the walk, dismounted and veered away to each side so that, counting Reagan, the three men formed the points of a triangle, with Judith and the two ranchers inside.

But if Pace Justin or Jim Tabor were aware of any of this, they gave no sign.

"Pace," said Jim Tabor, "they think they've got us bluffed. They beat hell out of my boy, and here's the one who was a lot responsible. Pace, I've got a bellyful."

"Same here, Jim," said Pace Justin. "We've took aplenty. Too damn' much! But we made a start last night, and now's a good time to improve on it. I aim to!"

That was Reagan's warning, and had he acted upon it he might have avoided one of his bitterest moments. Instead, he stood watching Judith Justin and wishing that she were a mile's distance from this trouble . . . Wishing that a lot of things could be a lot different.

He saw Justin's hand drop to the heavy riding gloves stuffed under his belt. He heard a spatting sound, felt a smarting pain that left his cheek tingling. In the deepening silence he saw the rancher's puckered eyes glowing like blue coals. Justin had let the gloves drop. His hand was on the butt of his gun.

"Jim," the rancher said, "I believe he's going to take it."

Yancey and the slim, dangerous fellow called Mexico John now were ranged alongside Mark Santell. Santell, Rob Kelly, all of them were waiting, expecting Boone Reagan to make the first move.

Reagan's somber eyes stared steadily at the rancher's contemptuous ones.

"You had a son, once," Reagan told him. "He got into a kid scrape and instead of helpin' him, you ruined his life. Now you'd ruin Judith's life, too—maybe get her killed. I'm not going to let you, Justin. Not unless you plug me in the back."

Reagan turned deliberately—turned his back on Pace Justin and Jim Tabor and went inside the hotel. He heard Mexico John's scornful laugh, heard Santell curse softly, bitterly. He went up to his room and not until he had shut the door behind him did the full realization come to him of all that he had let himself in for. He didn't give a double damn what Santell or Justin or anyone in this town thought of him, but he knew that the story would spread and he would never live it down. Because Pete Justin had been his friend—and, yes, because of Judith—he had let Pace Justin brand him for a coward.

Reagan's impulse was to get his horse and ride. But he remembered that the sorrel needed a rest, and he decided that morning would be soon enough for him to leave. There was nothing to hold him here, ever. Not even the memory of warm brown eyes and hair that glinted in the sunlight like new copper. He knew that he would never return again to San Blas.

DOWN below, men were hurrying along the walks, gathering in little groups. From the direction of the jail a gun blasted, then another. Hoof-sounds started up, rose to a headlong run, then faded in the night. A man started yelling.

"Santell! Santell, Sunny Tabor's broke jail! Shot Joe Tom!"

Reagan didn't move, except to roll another cigarette. He smoked it half through before boots came running up the hall. They stopped at his door and a hoarse voice demanded urgently: "Reagan, you there? Reagan, I've got to talk to you!"

Reagan tossed the cigarette out the window. "The door's unlocked. Come in."

He didn't get up from his chair. He thought that he knew what was coming next, but he felt no elation or satisfaction, nothing.

Pace Justin pushed open the door. The ranchman's hat was gone, his gray hair dripped blood. His breath came in jerks. He looked, Reagan thought, a lot different from the chunky, arrogant fellow who, a couple of hours ago, had slapped Reagan's face with a pair of leather gauntlets. Different, too, from the cold-eyed man of ten years ago who had given the signal for Jim Tabor to slap Lefty Bassett's horse from under him.

"Reagan," he panted, "you're a gunfighter, I know. I wrote the sheriff at Brownsville, tryin' to locate Pete. Found out all about you, both of you. Today, I guess I went loco, slappin' you. I—Reagan, forget that for now, won't you? Reagan," he was pleading, "you've got to help me!"

"How?" Reagan asked.

"Old Jim and me, we busted Sunny out of jail. But Santell was expectin' it, had his men spotted all around the place. They bowled me off my horse the first slug. Reckon they figured I was dead. They hit Jim's horse, too, and the one we had for Sunny is carryin' both of 'em. They won't get far before Santell and his gang catch up to 'em."

"You've got men," Reagan pointed out.

"They're not in town! There's been so much rustlin', Jim and me keep our men on guard 'most all time. And Santell's got everybody else here buffaloed. Reagan, you're the only man can help me! I wouldn't ask it for myself, but for old Jim and his boy—Reagan, you can name anything I own!"

"No," said Reagan, and got up from the chair. "All I owe to you or to Jim Tabor or his boy is a bad name and a lot of ugly memories. Step aside, Justin. I'm leavin' you and your troubles, and wild horses couldn't drag me back."

Reagan went down the hallway. He heard Justin's boots moving behind him, heard a door open and the voice of Judge Peyton call, "Hold on, Pace, I'm going with you."

REAGAN didn't stop until he reached the livery stable. The place was deserted, but he found his horse and gear. He saddled swiftly and headed the sorrel out on the River Road up which he had ridden a few short hours ago.

He rode steadily, and by the time the moon was up he was approaching the grassy road which branched off to the Justin ranch. A bit farther on was the Settlement Tree. The faint sound of gunshots ahead made Reagan wonder if Jim Tabor and Sunny could have headed this direction. He was not long in doubt. He topped a ridge and saw a knot of horsemen moving slowly down the long slope below him. Inside the circle of their horses, unmistakable in the bright moonlight, bobbed the red head of Sunny Tabor.

Reagan reined up a moment, watching, wondering what had happened to Jim Tabor. Perhaps, he thought ironically, if Pace Justin were watching this, he would remember a certain morning ten years ago.

He lifted the reins, intending to ride around the Settlement live-oak and all the memories associated with it. Because of the thick, curly mesquite grass he didn't hear the buckboard until it stopped beside him. He turned and saw Judith Justin.

He was not surprised. He said, "So Pace sent you to talk me over. You can't do it, Judith."

Again he lifted the reins, then he said, "One thing, though, I want to tell you. Pete is dead. He's better off dead. Any man is who lives by his guns. Tell your father that for me."

"Then why," she charged hotly, "do you value your own life so much? Dad didn't send me to you. He sent me to the ranch, for help. I didn't get there because I almost ran into Santell and the rest. They've got Jim Tabor and Sunny, taking them to the Settlement Tree. But they won't hurt them unless—" she whipped the bays into a run—"they kill me, too!"

Reagan saw her reach down, saw the moonlight gleam on the barrel of the rifle that her hand brought up. He stared after her a moment, then spurred his horse into a surging run.

He drew up alongside the racing buckboard team, caught the bridle of the near horse and forced the animals to a stop.

"You wait here!" he ordered the girl roughly. "Don't come after me, spoilin' my play, or you'll likely get Sunny killed."

He struck spurs to his sorrel; heard Judith's shouted question and answered it, though he knew that she would never hear or feel the bitterness of his words.

"Because you love Sunny Tabor, that's why. Because he's in a tough spot, through no fault of his own, and I can't leave him and live with myself afterward. I just thought I could."

ONCE more, as on that morning ten years ago, there was a settlement under the ancient live-oak. But this settlement was not with a rope. This settlement was with spilled blood, in swirling gunsmoke.

It didn't last long. Boone Reagan simply rode up to the tight, grim group under the gnarled tree. Gunwork of any kind was always much surer with your feet planted and steady beneath you, so Reagan dismounted. He stood at the edge of the tree's moon-cast shadow and watched with eyes that held something like amusement as men whirled their horses to face him.

There were six of them, not counting Sunny Tabor or old Jim, who sat slumped in the saddle, his shirt-front dark with blood. Besides the prisoners, there were Santell and Rob Kelly, Yancey, the slender Mexico John and two others. Santell spoke out impatiently.

"What now, Reagan? Why not ride on about your business and let us tend to ours? You don't work for me, you know."

"No," said Reagan softly, "don't, and never did."

He was watching Mexico John, whose hands, in the act of fitting a noose around Sunny's neck, still held the rope. Reagan saw the rope drop, and that was the signal he had been waiting for. His heavy guns came upward, fast as light. He felt them jar his hands, watched with almost a detached interest as Mexico John pitched sideways, clawing at his chest.

Reagan fired methodically, knowing that only the plunging of the frightened horses had saved him this long, knowing that he had to make his lead count. He was happy, happier than he had been in a long time.

A bullet touched his shoulder with a finger of fire. His arm went numb and he let one gun drop. He saw Santell and Rob Kelly, off

their horses now, leveling down on him. The gun in his right hand kicked his palm, and then only Kelly faced him. Flame tipped Kelly's gun.

Kelly cursed and then grinned as Reagan's weapon clicked empty.

Off yonder Reagan heard Yancey and the other two gunhands, cursing, fighting their horses. He saw Kelly's gun flame a second time just as Sunny Tabor, to one side of Kelly, drove spur to his horse, guiding the plunging animal with his knees and trying to run Kelly down.

A third time the sheriff's gun roared—and something slammed Reagan's chest, knocked him back against the trunk of the live-oak.

He was slipping down into blackness when he heard a voice call, "Turn around, Kelly. I've got my sights lined, and I'll drill you through! Drop that gun!" Reagan, in a great wonderment, thought that the voice was Judith Justin's. He heard pounding hoofs and the deep voice of Pace Justin trumpeting in triumph and wrath.

He knew no more until he came out of the swirling darkness to find himself in the back of a slowly-moving wagon. He lay with his eyes closed, and he heard the voice of Pace Justin say anxiously, "He's not gonna die, Doc. You let him die, and I'll—"

"That's something I can't tell you, Pace," said the dry voice of Doc Mabry. "Only God can tell you that. Jim Tabor will pull through, but this one—Reagan has lost a lot of blood. He's just a damned outlaw, I heard you say it yourself. So what the hell are you worryin' about?"

"You little runt, don't rub it in. I feel sorry enough, but I aim to make up for it. I aim to take this Reagan boy out to my ranch, feed him so much beans and beefsteak he gets hog fat. I aim to set him up on the prettiest piece of cow land this side of Amarilla! Doc, this country never will get through payin' Boone Reagan for what he done tonight. But here's one old mossyhorn who's going to make a mighty big try!"

"Shhh!" cautioned Doc Mabry. "He's coming out of it."

Reagan opened his eyes, expecting to see the weathered face of Pace Justin, or perhaps the white mustache of Doc Mabry. Instead, he found himself gazing into the warm brown eyes of Judith.

She said, "Boone . . . you've been babbling about Sunny Tabor, something about saving him for me. I—Boone, don't you know anything about women? I was a woman when you went away. I was sixteen. Now I'm twenty-six. Boone, why do you suppose I've never married?"

"I wouldn't know," Reagan said. "You tell me."

"Because," she said—and even in the moonlight Reagan saw the blush that came to her cheek—

"You know why, Boone."

Reagan felt himself slipping into the blackness again. But he was smiling. This time it was a warm, friendly blackness and he knew that he would come out of it again, to find Judith waiting.

10 STORY WESTERN 15c
MAGAZINE

LAW COMES TO HADES!

Double-barreled, brass-bound tough gents were Red Clark and Rube King—who came north of the Rio on a moonless night to free a wild, young kid from the blood-mad hangman of Los Chinos!

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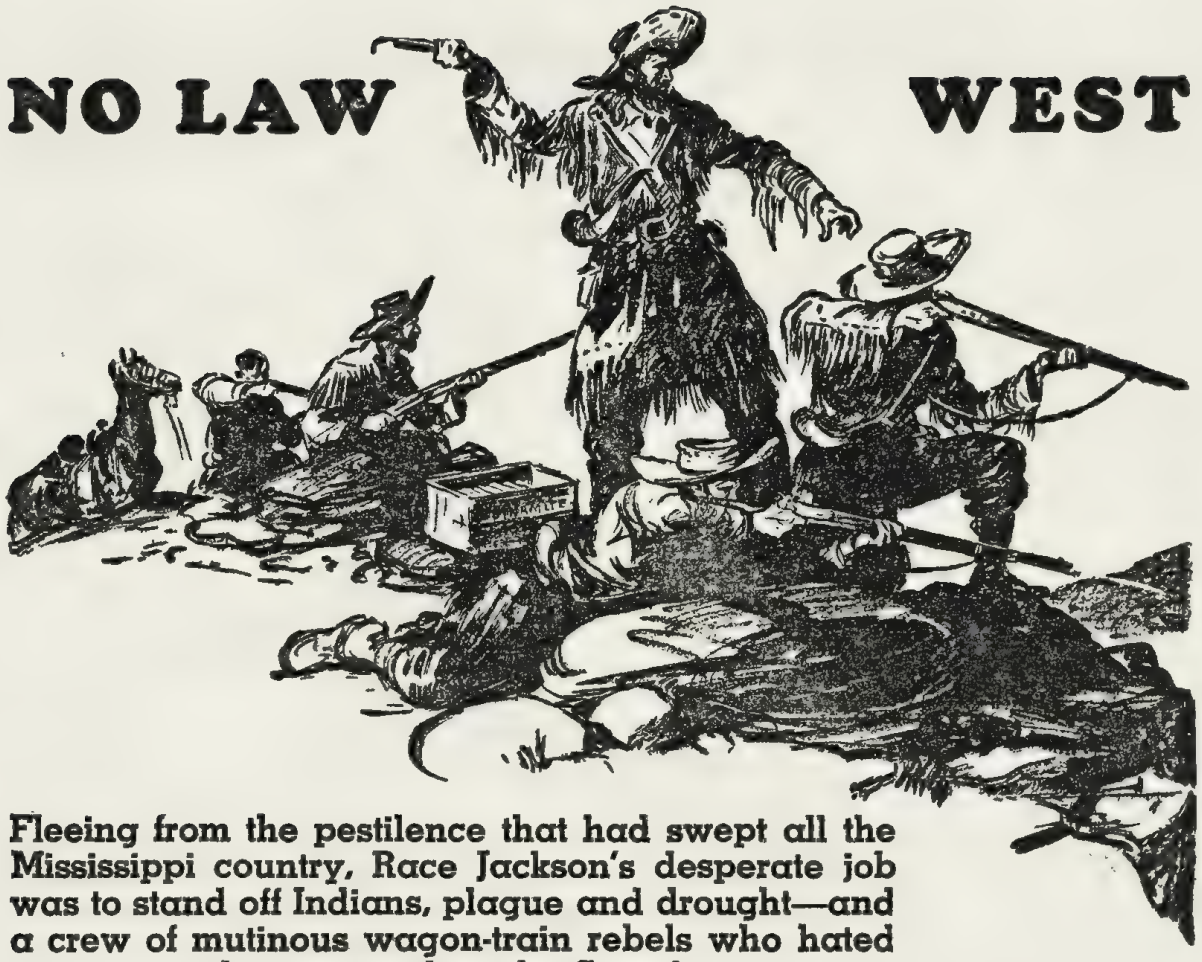
NO LAW WEST



Fleeing from the pestilence that had swept all the Mississippi country, Race Jackson's desperate job was to stand off Indians, plague and drought—and a crew of mutinous wagon-train rebels who hated him worse than the Sioux!

CHAPTER ONE

Water, $1000 A Barrel

THERE WAS neither bush nor tree as far as the eye could see. The air was blue and troubled, the land gray and lifeless, like the clouds of granite dust sweeping across the prairies—on and on, to where the railroad track disappeared in a faint and final glitter over the far horizon rim, with its telegraph poles still leaning drunkenly; tilted that way by great herds of buffalo scratching themselves against them in the spring to remove their long, shaggy coats of winter hair.

All Wyoming looked like it was going to hell that September afternoon in 1873. And yet it was full of life, now that the long, long trail still winding its weary way toward the Big Horn was getting within eighty miles of Fort Cheyenne. Wagon camps dotted the water holes or were spread up and down each petering little stream. At each camp bewhiskered men, beardless youths and hard-faced women stood with their guns ready and fierce, wild lights in their eyes, a menace to every traveler on the trail who even looked as if he might want to venture close to them.

Captain Race Jackson was getting damned tired of it. He was sick of the bickering, the bloodshed, the near-bloodshed and the panic-stricken eyes he had seen at every camp. Asiatic cholera had broken out in New Orleans. It had spread northward through the Mississippi Valley, then west along the trails and the railroad to Fort Cheyenne where reports had it, people were dying like flies. Half the towns along the railroad had become armed camps refusing admission to all strangers. Yet the wagon trains were still coming, more and more of them as people fled the country behind them.

Keeping south of the track where the trail was best, Jackson rode a mile ahead of the long train behind him, a lean, rangy man of thirty on a tall, dusty-white horse, his eyes as bitter and gray as the land itself. Many minutes had passed without a word between him and the gaunt, one-eyed old man on a rack-of-bone bay to his left. Anvil Brandon was not a talkative man until aroused.

They were both bearded and buckskinned, looking like two scouts grimly pushing their way through hostile Indian country; and it

OF FUNERAL BEND

Novel of the White-Skull Plains

By Tom Roan

It was sheer carnage down in the canyon.

was hostile country, if one strayed a few miles north or south of the tracks. Down there or up there ever-roving bands of reds—many of them outlawed by their own tribes—waited and watched among the buttes, ready to pounce upon the unwary to rob him of his horse, and most likely his scalp to boot.

"There'll be trouble ahead." The old man spoke now, right eye hard as a dark glass marble as it studied another camp a mile away, the square of felt over his empty left socket flapping in the wind. "I feel it."

Jackson nodded. It was the fourth day of it. Something had to bend or break soon. Too many people had lost their senses entirely in this cholera epidemic. It was not as hell-fired bad as they were making it; there was no reason for such panic. Many people who had never thought of going West had packed up and rolled away from their homes just because some neighbor had complained of a buzzing in the ears, palpitation of the heart or pressure over the stomach.

Any anxious gray face now, regardless of the cause, was one to be shunned as though the devil had suddenly popped out of hiding. It was enough to start a stampede if any one complained of a pain in the stomach or cramps in the arms or calves.

THE camp ahead was already bristling. It was on the north side of the tracks—about forty canvas-covered wagons, buggies and carts, wheel-locked into a circle around an old buffalo wallow in which a little brackish water remained. Finders were keepers out

here. A tall man garbed in black had appeared on the railroad track with a long rifle across the crook of his arm. He shaded his face against the dust with his right hand, and stared at the approaching riders and the ragged train behind them.

"Looks like a parson," grunted Anvil Brandon. "They can be the worst of all at times. They're even herdin' in their stock just like they was watchin' a dad-blamed swarm of Indians comin'."

Again Jackson was silent, watching the burst of sudden activity ahead. He would ask for water again, only a barrel of it if no more could be spared, and again he knew he would be refused.

"Keep off!" They were close enough now to hear the man on the tracks start yelling. "There ain't enough here for us! We ain't botherin' you! We want no trouble, but God knows we'll fight if you crowd us!"

"Mister, we're not looking for trouble!" Jackson was two hundred feet below the tracks when he pulled up, lifting his voice into a shout. "We have children in our train who are crying for water! We have people who are sick—"

"That last crack fixed it," groaned old man Brandon. "Just anybody with a headache would mean cholera to a fool like that."

"Keep goin'!" The man on the tracks started shaking his rifle above his head, and Jackson thought at that moment that he had never seen a leaner, meaner old buzzard-face than that face beneath the flopping brim of the wide black hat. "We don't want your sick makin' us sick! They're dyin' by the thousands an' tens of thousands in Fort Cheyenne!"

"There ain't ten thousan' people in Cheyenne!" yelled Brandon. "An' never was, yuh damn' fool!"

"Keep goin'!" The half-crazy man on the tracks was not listening,. "I don't want no bloodshed, I'll swear I don't but if you turn this way you'll drop dead outa your saddles! If you want water, go back to Funeral Bend. The river there is full of it."

"An' Funeral Bend," nodded Brandon, "lies four long days of hard trail behind us!"

"I don't care!" Old Buzzard-face was shaking his rifle again. "I'm Ashur Thistledown, captain of this train, an' I aim to take care of my own folks. Go on or don't move one step my way. I won't be able to hold the fire from these folks behind me if you make a wrong move."

That was true. Jackson could see it. Every man, boy and woman who could shoot a rifle or a shotgun stood ready, crouched behind wheel-hubs and wagons. An old woman in faded blue calico and a bonnet on her head was among the lot, a toothless crone with a muzzle-loader shotgun shaking violently in her hands.

"An' both hammers cocked," growled Brandon. "It'll be her kind what'll start it, Race. She's more dangerous than a hydrophobia bobcat. Better warn that dancin' fool on the track to look out for her. She'll let them shakin' fingers slip."

"Listen to me!" Jackson held up his hand. "Watch that old woman behind you. We have eighty-four families in that train behind us. If a fight starts they'll not leave a man or a woman alive in your camp.

"Wait!" He lifted his left hand now. "Listen to what I have to say! You can put down your guns. We're not coming any closer. But do this much for us: Load one of your water-barrels on a cart and fill it with water. Take it a mile out along the upper side of the track if you want to, and leave it there for the children."

"Nary a drop!" bawled back Ashur Thistledown, beginning another wild dance. "Water, mister is worth a thousand dollars a barrel—an' we ain't sellin' for that!"

RACE JACKSON was a sick man when the last wagon was past and he turned to ride on. It was the seventh wagon train he had led across the plains since the close of the war between the North and South. It would be his last. He knew that, and had said it would be when he had pulled out of Missouri with this mob. Now surer than ever he'd never let himself in for another thankless task like this.

He had three giant freighters in the train, driven by hired bullwhackers but he had not asked a single man, woman or child for this job. They had sought him out, eager men and women with bright and anxious eyes coming to him in droves, to beg him to lead them. The railroad had been there for them to take, the Silver Palace cars for the rich, the plain coaches for the poor who were traveling light, and boxcars for the whole family, the dog, the cat, the pig and the goat, the horses and mules and the cow—if one could pay the bill.

But these people were a poor lot. Eight out of ten of the families were plain farmers. Like thousands of other settlers going West to seek the free or nearly free lands of the Great Frontier, their wagons, their teams, yokes of oxen the household gear and farming equipment spelled the most they had to their names.

"Never saw nothin' like it!" growled Brandon. "Never in all my crossin's, in all my fussin' an' fightin'!"

By the time they were pitching their next camp, Race Jackson found himself the most hated man in the train and open revolution spilling all over him. He had pushed them on and on. The grumbling, the threatening and cursing, had started at sunset, the usual time for a train captain to call a halt.

Taking advantage of the cool light of the

stars and the rising moon, he had insisted on grinding on, hoping to sight water that had not been taken over as he mounted each slight rise. An hour before midnight, dragging oxen, mules and horses could not stand it another mile and he had been forced to camp on a windy flat as bare of water and vegetation as a mans hand.

He was sitting on the wagon tongue of his forward freighter at the west end of the camp, gnawing on cold bacon and dry bread cooked the night before, when Anvil Brandon came stomping up in the darkness from the other end of the line to bring him the worst of the news.

"Well, it's done Race." The old man hunkered down on one heel beside his left knee. "They've kicked yuh out."

"I've been expecting it before this, Anvil."

"Yeah, I know yuh have." Brandon sent a streak of tobacco-juice cutting away like an arrow through the darkness, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "The other end of the camp is like a swarm of bees astirrin'. They're madder'n hell with the lid shot off. You thought, maybe, that that fella Ashur Thistledown could be hard back there on the track, but you ain't seen nothin'."

"And I suppose," Jacksons voice was gentle, "my good friend and constant backer, the handsome Mr. Roderick Bellarkin led the attack with one of his most eloquent speeches?"

"He didn't, and I know it's goin' to hurt." Brandon put his hand on his knee. "It was folks you've befriended the most of anybody in the train. It was Parson Joe Goodnight an' his daughter, Henrietta.

"The gal, I think," he added after a moment, "made the best talk, pointin' out the most sins of a man just turnin' deaf ears to the cryin' an' wailin' of the children. She says yuh was warned to stay in Funeral Bend. Sorter hard, ain't it, comin' from Parson Joe an' the gal, an' folks all sayin' you an' her would be married when we got where we're goin' an' yuh got a chance to get yore store opened on the Big Horn?"

JACKSON was speechless for the moment, sitting there suddenly cold behind the ears, the bacon and chunk of hard bread forgotten. The things they had been saying about him and Henrietta Goodnight were only half true. It had been in his heart no less than a score of times to ask her to marry him, but his courage had always failed him. God knew she was as pretty and vivacious as they came. Light gold was in her hair, the bluest blue sky a man ever saw always shining in her eyes.

"I heard some whisperin'," Brandon was going on in a low growl, his good eye glowering into the darkness, "that it was plumb damn' pore pay-back for lendin' 'im money."

"You never heard me say that I loaned him money, Anvil."

"No, I didn't!" The old man glanced up quickly. "But Parson Joe's told about it a lot of times. We was for yuh, whole hide an' coon at the start. But come that Bellarkin fella, this cholera scare gettin' worse an' worse, an' the shortage of water—well, mebbe it's all turned his head. It's shameful dirty, an' I told 'em so. I hope, damn' 'em, they all get the cholera now, an' especially Rod Bellarkin, tinhorn small-town banker's son that he is!"

He turned in soon after that, but he did not sleep as he lay there on his bed inside his forward wagon, with the wall of canvas lifted to let the night wind in. An east-bound train had passed about two hours before dawn. He lay wide-awake, watching the cars go by.

It was one of those Silver Palace trains, with a speed strictly limited to eighteen miles an hour. He knew what it was like: soft-slippered stewards whispering, Axminster carpets, silver railings and trim, luxurious beds, hair mattresses on springs, rich California blankets, fine sheets and pillows, and twenty-four people asleep in each car under the dreamy light of four big silver lamps against the ceiling. Good going for the rich—and only a few nights ago he had been dreaming of taking Henrietta Goodnight for a long ride on a train just like that!

When morning came he was sitting on the wagon tongue, ready for them. Parson Joe Goodnight was in the lead of the crowd, a tall, gaunt man in black, devoutly pious, rarely to be seen without a small New Testament under his left arm and held there so exactly it seemed that it clung to him instead of the other way around.

Mr. Roderick Bellarkin was next, tall, sandy-haired, high-mannered in his mouse-colored beaver, his tight doeskin trousers, the elaborate vest, shining boots and long-tailed coat, thin mustache waxed, face shining from a new shave.

The rest—the mob bringing up the rear like bulls ready to charge—did not matter. They were just plain damned yokels, reminding him of voters getting ready to cast their lot for a glass of beer or a cheap cheroot. Race Jackson thought of himself, unshaven for almost a week, his old and trail-worn buckskins stained, half the beads gone, the fringe gone from the elbows. His boots were dusty, a rowel missing from the half-rusty spur at his right heel. Compared to Bellarkin he was pretty much of a scarecrow, one that had been dragged backwards through a knot-hole at that, he guessed. A girl like Henrietta Goodnight could not help noticing the difference. The thought made him smile, and the smile took some of the starch out of Parson Joe Goodnight's face.

"YOU won't have to say it, Mr. Goodnight." Jackson arose, broad shoulders squared, hands clasped behind him and his gaze on a distant knoll to southward. "It is natural that I would know the decision as quickly as any other man in the train. Whatever you've decided—well, I have no word to say in my behalf.

"No, I mean that!" He held up his hand quickly, stopping the preacher as he opened his mouth to say something. "You are now out of the dangerous stretches of the Indian country. As long as you stay close to the railroad it should be as safe as a baby's cradle on into Fort Cheyenne—if you keep on right into Cheyenne. I'd swing from the trail well this side of it. The going will be tough, but it's worth it.

"After you strike north for the Big Horn you'll have to watch out for Indians again. Old Sitting Bull's up that way. So is Rain in the Face, and Crazy Horse. In places the country's wild and rough for many miles, and soldiers—even General Custer—can't be everywhere. I wish you the best of luck, and I wouldn't worry too much more about water." He turned, looking up at what would have appeared to a less-trained eye as no more than a grayish haze overhead, stretching on like a darkening finger to the western horizon rim. "I think you'll have it before long."

"Rain?" Bellarkin's eyes widened and it looked as if he was about to laugh. "With that kind of a rising sun?" He looked eastward where the sun was like a huge drop of blood on the rim. "I think you are dreaming, Jackson, or perhaps merely indulging in one of your frequent whims of fantasy."

"Yes?" Jackson faced him, squarely. "I don't recall having asked your opinion in the matter, Mr. Bellarkin."

"You wouldn't!" Bellarkin laughed, but the look in his china-blue eyes gave it the lie. "The cooperation of a little actual gray matter under an educated man's skull might be slightly too much for a cheap, pistol-packing fool like you, Race Jackson!"

"Gentlemen!" yelled the preacher, getting his first chance to speak at last, and only then in a voice of great desperation. *"Gentlemen,* beware the hasty tongue lifting in wrath against thy neighbor!"

It was too late. The two of them were already coming together, evenly matched in reach, height and weight. There had been a lot of talk in the train of Roderick Bellarkin as a boxer of outstanding ability. He had excelled in it in school, and this was his opportunity. Jackson was of the common run, a fighting man in a rough-and-tumble manner.

Fists were flung up as they closed in. Two blows were struck. One sounded like a plank parting in half under sudden pressure. The second was a softer, slushing sound that brought up a sudden little cloud of dust and a flying shower of gravel.

Mr. Jackson had hit Mr. Bellarkin, and Mr. Bellarkin had hit the ground heels over head from the iron-hard fist that had landed flat on his jaw.

"Fight!" yelled the crowd. *"Fight!" "Fight!"*

CHAPTER TWO

Trail Boss of the Damned

RACE JACKSON drew the blame for it, which was the natural thing, but no one really ever knew—not even Jackson himself—who it was that knocked the complete hell-sweet-home out of Parson Joe Goodnight. It happened too fast. A red-headed, wildly bearded big Missourian by the name of Lige Pedley was rushing in the moment the handsome Roderick Bellarkin was down. Jackson caught him just right, sent him sprawling.

Then a crowd was upon him, the fists flying and battering. In a matter of seconds it was over, seven men tumbled on the ground, and Jackson back against the wagon tongue with his remaining few friends crowding up behind him, the most of them ready to finish the play with knife or ball.

"And that's the thing," he nodded toward the yet-sprawling Bellarkin, his chest heaving and falling, "that I've been wanting to do for a long time. If he reaches for one of those little revolvers he carries in his waistband, when he wakes up then I'll drive twelve good balls of lead in his head—and kill any other damned friend of his in the lot who steps forward to take his place. That goes for the last one of you bawling and bleating sheep."

"That's singin' 'em a tune they can understand," intoned old Anvil Brandon at his back. "The only one they can! You oughta sung 'er long ago. It ain't in some folks to appreciate, it ain't in some to try to pull together. What these varmints are gonna do out in the real Indian country is more'n I know. I expect the most just to curl up their toes an' die like doodle-bugs gettin' drowned out in a big rain."

"And Moses struck the rock." That was from Goodnight, now on his hands and knees, his book still under his arm. "And the water gushed forth. Gentlemen, I've prayed for it.

"And the water gushed forth," repeated Parson Joe Goodnight, now on his knees, hands thrust in front of him, face upturned to the sky. "When Moses struck the rock."

"It was the ground yuh hit, parson," said Brandon, "An' it's dry'er'n a last year's buffalo bone."

"I've prayed for it," Goodnight was going

on. And, lo, it has come to pass. My prayer has been answered."

And then they understood. All around them great drops were falling. It was rain, coming as if by a miracle from that thin haze Jackson had looked at overhead a short time before. Out of it the raindrops grew faster and faster, thumping, dancing and splattering on the canvas tops of the wagons, making little volcanic spurts of dust jump from the ground.

Men turned, staring at each other queerly, then at the ground, then upward. Something like a groan of incredulous despair lifted. A lanky old man closed his eyes and thrust out his tongue. An ox lowed dolefully behind him, and then—the fight suddenly forgotten by every man in the crowd—a mighty sea of wild yells arose.

"Rain!" "Rain!" "Hit's arainin'!"

It was more than that; it was soon a cloudburst, the water slopping out of the sky as if it came from great barrels upending. The crowd did not yet break. The surprise was too great for that to happen immediately. The lanky old man still stood with his face lifted, his tongue thrust out. He smiled and kept smiling, standing there as if he would never get enough of it. In the noise of the downpour a mule brayed happily, and a mare nickered to her colt somewhere in the background.

MR. RODERICK BELLARKIN came out of his deep darkness just as the yelling crowd broke, with men fleeing to catch water and fill the empty barrels on their wagons while their women and children looked after the stock. Even Parson Joe Goodnight and the men who had attempted to fight for him had gone when Bellarkin sat up like a dazed bull and glowered questioningly around him.

He was a sorry sight. His fine hat had flung from his head when Jackson knocked him down. Somebody had stepped in the middle of it, crushing it all out of shape, a spurred heel going through the top. Water was now filling it, and mud was rapidly forming and puddling around him. He looked up again, and saw Jackson standing there, waiting for him. For once he faced the train captain alone, for even Jackson's men had hurried away to catch water for their stock and their long-empty barrels.

"What did you hit me with, Jackson?" Bellarkin's lips curled. "Or was it one of your damned flunkies from behind? That would be a hell of a lot more like you, I think."

"We don't fight from behind out here, Bellarkin." Jackson was dripping from head to heel but he did not seem to notice it. "And you're a dirty-dog liar when you say you think I'd call for help with a rat like you! This thing was strictly between us two. It will always be like that, and I hope you're not yet satisfied. We're alone now. There'll be no one to separate us or pull the other fellow off. I don't believe in hollering for quits when I get started. Get on your feet and we'll finish it. . . .

"You've wanted it like this." His mouth cracked into a one-sided grin. "From the start you've kept a knife grinding in my back at every sneaky opportunity that's come your way. You weren't man enough to come out in the open with your complaints. That's not the way of your kind. Listen, Bellarkin."

He took a couple of steps forward and leaned close, voice almost a whisper as he called him a dozen names that would have made any man from Maine to California get up and fight. Bellarkin only glowered and reached for his dripping hat. Like a dog with its hindquarters broken, he dragged himself away for a few yards, then leaped to his feet to run. He had not taken more than forty long jumps before he skidded to a stop.

Henrietta Goodnight was standing there beside a dripping wagon, watching him with those wide, china-blue eyes. He slipped, fell in the mud, and swore under his breath as he turned to her.

"He hit me," he hissed, "with a pair of brass knuckles."

"No," she shook her head, water spilling from her hat as she turned abruptly away, "he didn't do that, Mr. Bellarkin. He hit you only with his fist. I saw it all."

"You must listen to me, Henrietta!" He was up, following her. "I was not at fault. I'm a gentleman, and he—he—"

"He's a *man!*" she finished coldly, and kept hurrying on toward her wagons. "I'm sorry for everything I've done."

"Wait, Henrietta!" He caught up with her, seizing her by the right arm, and jerking her to a stop. "By God no woman can do this to a Bellarkin! I have a right to an explanation—"

"And I don't want it!" she snapped, trying to pull away. "Let go of my arm! Money and fine feathers, Mr. Bellarkin, do not always make fine birds. Release my arm, I tell you!"

"I tell you," he growled, eyes narrow, wet lips drawn back, "no woman can do this to a Bellarkin—"

"Let her go!" A big hand had clamped itself on his shoulder, coming down like a claw. He turned and looked up into old man Anvil Brandon's cold right eye. "The best thing now is to let things slide an' wait a spell. If Race Jackson sees yuh doin' this he'll kill yuh just like he'd kill a damned bull-rattlesnake!"

HE SAT on the wagon tongue just before noon and watched them string out, long canvas tops swaying, harness straining, the

yokes creaking. Truly, the larger wagons were prairie schooners, rightly named. He was glad of one thing: every available water-barrel had been filled this time before the rain let up and the blazing sun took over.

The air was still, the sky again blue. Ahead dry stream-beds, buffalo wallows and natural water-holes would be running full. That would be a lot of help, he guessed, wondering just how many in the train knew that it was only a cloudburst that had come and was gone, wetting the country in a swath probably no more than a thousand yards wide. The ground would quickly soak up the most of it, but those barrels would see them through—at least to Fort Laramie, if they kept bull-headedly all the way into the town. They would keep the barrels filled from now on, instead of bickering and arguing that there was no use of it with water surely to be found in just any old place ahead.

Armed with a rude map Jackson had sketched for him back in Missouri, Parson Joe Goodnight had taken the lead on his high-headed old roan. He was surrounded by his chosen lieutenants, mostly his devout followers. Roderick Bellarkin was probably in one of his two big wagons and keeping out of sight, too ashamed of himself right now to make a dashing display on the thousand-dollar black horse trailing behind his second freighter. Jackson caught no sight of him or of Henrietta Goodnight.

The girl's mother and Young Joe, a tall, arrogant brother of eighteen, drove the Goodnight wagons. Neither Young Joe nor his mother even glanced Jackson's way, but there was one who had not forgotten. It was Andy, the girl's younger brother, a freckle-faced tow-head of ten who slipped around at the last minute to pay his respects.

"I ain't aholdin' with Pa," he had whispered, thrusting out a dirty little paw of a hand, "though I ain't big enough to come out agin 'im to his face. You an' me are thicker'n thieves in a bed, an' when I get bigger I aim to keep it thataway, Race." There had been an awkward pause then: "You'd sorter like it like that, wouldn't you?" He waited, staring up at Jackson, anxious-faced.

"You know I would, Andy." Jackson had put an arm around him, giving him a tight hug. "You take care of yourself—and watch out for the reds when you get into the Indian country."

"I will, Race, but there's one thing more." Andy Goodnight had glanced around them quickly. "Henrietta cried all night after she'd got up an' said what she said. Ma keeps atellin' 'er that Bellarkin fella's a good catch. I guess it was Ma who made Pa do what he did. I know she made Henrietta talk. The Bellarkin fella says he's gonna start a bank when we get out yonder where we're goin'. Pa told Ma last night that a bank ain't the only thing a man needs in a family. They had one *hell* of a row."

He had slid away with that, but he was behind the Goodnight wagon on a gray jenny when they passed, and it looked like the kid had been crying. Jackson saw him look his way just once. Biting his lips, the boy kept his head up after that and his eyes straight ahead, his mouth a compressed crack. Jackson turned and looked the other way for a long time.

"All didn't pull out, Race." Anvil Brandon had come up. "Guess yuh sorter figured they wouldn't. Red Bird Bill Copeland an' his buffler outfit ain't turnin' a wheel."

COPELAND was a buffalo hunter who had swung in with them just out of Funeral Bend. It had caused a devil of a howl, for his outfit had come up from the south, heading for the new hunting grounds being opened up in the north. There were eight giant wagons in his outfit with foot-wide iron tires, half of them drawn by long strings of oxen, the rest by stout mules.

His men were bearded, buckskinned and dirty; hard-swearing, hard-drinking men, armed to the teeth, each carrying a poison tube swinging from a string around his neck so that he could kill himself quickly and escape the torture if the Indians caught him killing off their natural source of meat. Jackson had taken them into the train in spite of all the protests.

It was not long now before Copeland was coming up—and a better name had never been cut out for a man. He wore elaborately fringed and beaded yellow buckskins, like the fine moccasins on his huge shovels of feet. As a really shocking contrast to the rest of his outfit, he was immaculately clean. Nevertheless, he was something made for taking bulls by the horns and stomping the daylights out of them. He was a whale of a brute of fifty-five, six feet and seven inches tall. The hair that hung to his shoulders was as red as flame, never combed. The wind blew through it, fanning his great, blazing mattress of beard, letting it flap and fly wildly.

"Heard you wasn't movin'," he grinned, seating himself on the tongue. "Figured you wouldn't, so me and my men'll still string along with you, if you won't mind the company."

"A change would do us all a lot of good, Bill," Jackson grinned. "That is a change back to ourselves. We'll be glad to have you, but I'm through posing as leader of a train."

"But you ain't," growled the older man. "Me an' my bunch are new to these parts. We need to follow a man who knows 'em. You

won't have a passel of wimmin an' kids now—an' a lot of milk-an'-mush two-legs called men to whine an' grumble. I ain't got a man in my bunch who can't whip his weight sixteen times over in wildcats, an' I can whip any four of 'em quicker'n you can fill an' light a pipe. You heard nary grumble outa them—an' by Gawd, Race, you won't."

They were ready to start rolling the next morning. Jackson's horses and oxen needed a rest, and it was the same with Red Bird Bill Copeland and his outfit. Where they would have ordinarily started at daylight, they were in no great hurry now. The sun was almost three hours high before the leading wagon started to move back into the trail.

Now Ashur Thistledown appeared, coat-tails flying, wide black hatbrim flopping as he came tearing along the side of the railroad and shouting at them from the top of his voice. It was the first time anybody noticed that his wagons, buggies and carts were coming along the trail more than a mile behind him in a slow-weaving line.

"Stay where you are until we pass!" he bellowed, waving his long arms wildly. "Stay where you are! We ain't catchin' th' cholera by minglin' with strangers!"

"A MESS is a mess," growled Red Bird Bill Copeland, sidling up to Jackson on a tall, wall-eyed bay. "But a dog's bait is just a shade too much. That gander needs a lesson. Now I'll do somethin' my heart was cryin' to do yesterday."

With a sudden gouge of his big spurs he was gone before Jackson could stop him, the bay shooting away as if the devil had blown him into action. It was too much for Ashur Thistledown. The red-headed horseman was upon him before he could pull to a halt, swing to one side or wheel and go racing back toward his train.

Red Bird Bill Copeland might have been handling a dummy filled with straw. He caught Thistledown somewhere about the mid-section, lifted him clear of his saddle, spun him overhead, and slapped him belly-downward across his lap. He yanked up a Spanish quirt from his saddle horn. With it, he proceeded to give the yelling and kicking Thistledown's upturned stern the whipping of its life.

"An' now that's that!" yelled the giant, again lifting his victim, spinning him like a long-legged rag doll overhead, and then sending him flying into a nearby clump of sage-brush. "We ain't got no hydrophobia, we ain't got no smallpox. So far, Mister Monkey-pants, nobody's showed signs of cholera, whoopin'-cough or the measles, but if we've got 'em all, you can take 'em back to your poke of tripe an' let 'em catch 'em. Get up from there an' grab your hoss before the Indians run off with 'im!"

"You—you're crazy!" yelled Thistledown as he stumbled to his feet. "I—I oughta shoot you dead outa that saddle!"

"Start reachin' for your hardware!" Copeland's sudden outburst of laughter was enough to jar the dignity of a saint. "Why, you long-legged, lantern-jawed polecat, you ain't got guts enough to fight! Hell, we ain't got no sickness, ain't had, ain't goin' to have. All we've got now is just a bad smell since you come meddlin' into our little poke of knittin'. Want me to catch that hoss?"

"You hold, now, you hold!" Thistledown was bouncing around, briskly rubbing his seat with both hands, but he was no longer looking at Copeland. He was staring beyond him. "Ain't that fella on yonder white hoss Cap'n Race Jackson? Yeah, I know it is! After he'd gone on past our camp yesterday an old man in our bunch told us about 'im. We're headin' for the Big Horn River, up yonder in Montana. We had a man guidin' us, but he quit us cold in Funeral Bend. I took the cap'n's job, but I don't know the way to the Big Horn. Last night we had a meetin'—

"But why waste my wind with you?" He was scurrying forward now. "Cap'n Jackson, such a little outfit here by the trail fooled me. Never thought it could be you after passin' with such a big outfit yesterday. But we need help, an' they say I ain't fit. Cap'n Jackson, will you please, sir, lead us to the Big Horn?"

CHAPTER THREE

Lead on to Hell!

"THE war oughta learned me somethin'," explained Thistledown as he staggered to the end of his plea. "I was the best bugler, they said, in the whole Ohio Volunteers. I tried to tell 'em back there that that water in the wallow was bad. It was already crawlin' when you passed by yesterday. The rain come, an' then we made up our minds. Settin' on the roadside waitin' is the best way in the world to catch anything. Will you lead us, Cap'n Jackson?"

" 'Suffer little children to come unto me,' " quoted Red Bird Bill Copeland, looking at the train slowly coming up. "By Gawd, I've never laid eyes on a scabbier-lookin' outfit! Still, it looks like yo're elected, Race. The wimmin can't help it, an' the kids in that shebang didn't ask to be born an' drug out here by the heels. It'll be like draggin' a sick flock of buzzards into Montana Territory by the tail-feathers, but you can't help it."

It was an unholy step-down, the worst Jackson thought he had ever undertaken. But

there was no choice. People had a right to move, to follow along the trail. Half of them were already sick in the little train. Many had come in anything that looked as if it would roll, and the most of their turn-outs were not fit for such a journey. It was a wonder to Jackson that half of them had made it this far.

"I'll point the way." He weakened at last. "That's about all. You, Red Bird, will have to answer for that outfit. You'll be in charge of the stock and the camps—"

"But—but, hell, I'm a buffalo hunter!" roared Copeland. "Not a wet-nurse for a passel of spindle-shanked men an' wimmin an' kids! I might take me up a neck-yoke an' knock their brains out."

"You said you could hold your end of the stick." Jackson was as hard as nails with him. "Don't make yourself out a liar. I've called your hand, Red Bird."

"Some day," groaned the buffalo hunter, "I shorely do hope I learn to keep my damn' big mouth shut. Look here!" he glowered at Thistledown. "You got all your water-barrels filled, Daddy Long Legs?"

"Why—why, no, we ain't," admitted Thistledown, awkwardly. "You see—well, with all the rain yesterday—"

"You didn't figure you'd need to fill!" Copeland groaned again. "Well, by Gawd, you will at the first water or I'll split your jawbones with an axe an' tie 'em around to the back of your ol' buzzard neck. Tell that long-eared jackass outfit of yours to fall in behind."

"IF ONLY Mr. Bellarkin could see yuh now!" grinned Anvil Brandon as they rolled on. "Gawd A'mighty, it'd break his heart—with happiness! I'll be sorter pityin' him when you two are pitched together agin on the Big Horn."

Jackson sulked under the strain. It was even worse than he had thought. Cholera had already struck the outfit. A dying old man in a lopsided wagon sent for him when they made the first camp. He climbed into the wagon and saw him lying there, ashen-faced, with an old woman squatting on her stringy hams beside him, feeding him sage tea.

"It's the real thing," admitted the old fellow. "Me an' my Nancy know it. We went through it in California in 'Thirty-three after the Irish had brought it to Quebec in 'Thirty-two an' let it spread all the way West. I'm Ford Price. I recognized you yesterday when you passed, me just layin' there in my wagon, plumb helpless. Saw you once in Cheyenne. See that our gran'daughter an' gran'son get through, if you can."

They buried him two evenings later on a grassy flat. His wife had it by this time. She had begun with the usual nausea, restlessness and chills. Pains in the stomach and around the heart had struck her. They had gone down and up, into the calves and arms. She whimpered constantly for water, until the fatal coma. Three evenings later they lowered her into her grave. She marked the end of it, for Red Bird Bill Copeland had seen a lot of the disease around New Orleans and knew what to do.

"Boil or burn all their clothes an' beddin'," he had ordered. "You don't catch it by the breath or the sweat, but take no chance. An' watch the water you drink. Bein' clean, eatin' clean an' drinkin' clean is the best thing I know to keep it away. An' don't tell anybody we might overtake that we've had it among us. The scare is sometimes worse'n cholera itself."

FORD PRICE'S granddaughter and grandson had already come into the picture. Anna Price was enough to knock most men down and send them away talking to themselves. She had the fairest face, the blackest hair and eyes Race Jackson had ever seen—a tall and shapely girl at twenty already as serious as a woman of thirty-five. Gruber Price, her brother, was long and lank, two years younger, just as fair, as black-eyed and black-haired—and just as serious. Jackson liked the youth from the start, and soon it was fully evident that Gruber Price and his sister were the most helpful and willing pair in the entire lot.

"Give 'em a half-break," commented Anvil Brandon, "an' them two'll come through with bells on."

But there were other troubles. As soon as they were away from the original old Oregon Trail along the railroad, it looked as if all the fates were conspiring against them. Wagons started breaking down, old wood, old wheels, tongues and coupling tongues, bolsters, hounds, felloes and spokes, axles and skeins. The troubles seemed invariably to come to the dirt-poor devils of the lot.

Such things brought more delay and trouble than anything else. In one mean stretch they traveled ten days where they would have made it easily enough in two if it had not been for all the break-downs. One could not push on and leave them there. It would have been cold-blooded murder.

Scouts were thrown out by this time. Race Jackson's and old man Brandon's eyes were always on the rims, the distant knolls, and studying the backs of the ever-increasing ridges ahead that marked the foothills of the mountains. Far-away smoke signals had been spotted the afternoon of the second day after leaving the railroad. The trouble signs were growing every day, but nine out of ten of the settlers in Ashur Thistledown's train were blissfully unaware of even the faintest hint of danger lurking beyond those distant skylines.

The first great wave of excitement spread through the train one afternoon at sundown, on the high east bank of a tumbling little creek spilling down a broad valley. Indians were sighted now, twenty-two bucks and seven squaws coming down the valley. Yells and curses arose. Men grabbed for their guns, and Jackson had to bawl some sense into their heads.

"Every redskin out here is not a professional scalp-hunter!" he told them harshly. "And even if he was, you've got to play your cards carefully. Down with your guns!"

"But—but I see feathers spinnin'!" yelled an excited Missourian. "I see paint ashinin' from here!"

"Shut up before I stomp you!" roared in Red Bird Bill Copeland. "If you look closer you'll see squaws an' kids ridin' the baggage ponies behind that string of bucks. You surely saw that kind of a turn-out a lot of times back along the railroad. Keep your mouths shut an' let Cap'n Jackson handle this in his own way."

"If one comes close to me," put in a slatternly woman of forty in pink calico, "I'll open up acuttin' with my butcher-knife!"

"You're the kind who would!" snapped Jackson. "You're the kind who start a lot of needless bloodshed out here by a slip of the tongue or a finger. Those reds are friendly, at least for the time being. You don't see the other kind until you hear them yelling and the ponies coming at you at full-tilt."

IT WAS almost war when he let them come into the camp. They wanted bread, and they were not above stealing any loose article that struck their eyes, if the chance afforded. But it was here that Anna Price came in. She gathered a basketful of cold bread from among the wagons. Adding cold meat to the gathering from her own wagon, she turned it over to them. The old buck of the lot looked at her a long time with keen, intently bright eyes. He turned to his pony as if he had had enough of her, then turned back. Suddenly he lifted a necklace of eagle claws from his neck, and without a word dropped it over the girl's head.

"His medicine, they call it," explained Jackson. "A trinket to keep you from harm. He's old Thunder Hawk, one of the lesser chiefs, of the Little Snakes—in other words, the Sioux."

"But—but," the girl's black eyes widened, "we heard near Funeral Bend that the Sioux are on the war-path!"

"There's a lot of the Sioux outfit," he told her. "Some good, some bad, some howling bad. Thunder Hawk might kill and scalp you back in the hills somewhere, but he won't try it here. I've met him before. He carries a lot of weight, even among some of the bad ones."

The reds camped on the creek five hundred yards below the train. Buffalo had been killed by the whites the day before, and Jackson sent Anvil Brandon and Gruber Price down to them with a regular load of meat piled behind their saddles. Later, after the supper fires were dying, he took a pouch of tobacco and strolled down himself. Half the camp, lying under heavy guard, was asleep before he returned to his wagon.

"Thunder Hawk's doing no talking," he confided to Brandon, Copeland and the wide-eyed young Price next morning when they were on the move. "Wouldn't do for him, of course. He's friendly enough, here, but he's all Indian inside that skull, and I can't blame 'im. Did you notice anything about his camp this morning or his outfit as they pulled out?"

"I did, yeah," nodded Brandon. "There was thirty-one ponies in the outfit last night. There was thirty ponies when they pulled out down the crick at dawn."

"Exactly!" nodded Jackson. "Thunder Hawk's a tricky old rascal. Despite our guard extending below them, and I warned every man to be alert, he slipped a scout through our lines somewhere during the night—most likely an hour or so before dawn. That scout is probably pow-wowing with a younger chief somewhere ahead of us right now."

"Then," ventured Gruber Price, big eyes bright,"we're goin' to have to fight, Mr. Jackson?"

"My boy," Anvil Brandon answered him, "this is fightin' country. If it ain't God knockin' the sap outa yuh with cloudbursts, heat, cold winds, dust an' landslides, then it's the reds or plain bad whites such as hoss-thieves an' road agents makin' it hard on yore body an' soul. Yuh start fightin' when yuh hit here. Yuh keep right on fightin' 'til yuh die. I like it, I reckon, because of that. It don't cost nothin' to die out here. Back yonder eastwise in them towns yuh can't afford it. Costs too damn' much to get buried."

EVEN if they had gone by Fort Cheyenne, Jackson knew that Parson Joe Goodnight's outfit should be well ahead of them now. Jackson's outfit had wasted time, often through sheer carelessness. Red Bird Bill Copeland had twice been on the verge of throwing up his part of the job. Once it looked as if words were getting too hot to be handled by mouth between him and Jackson, but Jackson had won out in the end by taunting him unmercifully about the boast he had made that morning after the main pull-out beside the railroad.

Montana Territory was before them now, the mountains jumping up and up, wild and ragged against the skyline. Wagons were still breaking down, but water was plentiful now. So were buffalo, deer and antelope. Great swarms of grouse took flight before them or

at either hand. Jackson was worried one afternoon when they started shooting wild geese by the score on a still, mirror-like lake on a high plateau. Geese, here, meant the cold weather was driving them out of the north far earlier than usual this year. Snow might come at any time in these high places. Half of Thistledown's outfit had already started cursing the icy nights and heavy frosts covering the ground at dawn.

It was on the north rim of the great pleateau where they had shot the geese that trouble hit them. "Things are awful beyond the rim, Race!" Gruber Price—now a full-fledged scout under old Anvil Brandon's guidance—had galloped back with the news just before sundown. There were tears in the youth's eyes, his voice shaky. "There's dead men an' women on a little flat down on the slope. I counted what's left of eight wagons that's been burned clean to the ground. There's dead stock all around. It musta been an awful fight."

Jackson ordered the train halted just before it reached the rim. He rode down the slope beside Price, while the silent Anvil Brandon and a stern-faced group brought up the rear. A great, gulping sob shook him when he slipped from his saddle.

The scalpless form of little Andy Goodnight lay among the first of the bodies. The boy was on his back with a strange half-smile, half grimace on the cold white face—just like that morning on the jenny behind the wagon when Jackson had seen him the last time. Driven through his chest was a Sioux arrow, its long, slender shaft broken, the dangling, brightly feathered end slow-waving in the wind. Beyond him lay his jenny, an arrow through her brain.

"Boy musta been on stock guard." Brandon's voice was hoarse, face gray. There was not a tremble to his lips, but his old eye was like a bullet, reading all the signs. "A surprise attack, first a rain of arrows, then the yells an' rifle balls. An' on an' on down the slope, look at 'em! My Gawd, they musta pulled out an' tried to run for it right in the middle of the fight!"

"I've spotted 'em, Race!" Copeland had galloped on down the slope and was hurrying back. "That little point of high ground down there lets you see. They're in a canyon down yonder, sorter slammed together helter-skelter, it appears like from the point. Looks like the fight's still goin' on, though reds fight only at night unless they're mighty sure of 'emselves."

FOUR nights ago, I'd say 'twas." Brandon was still studying the signs all around, and speaking as if only to himself as he squatted beside the body of Andy Goodnight. "Grass an' the swell of the bodies tells that." He looked at the body of the boy again. "I'm just as sorry as sorry can be. Yuh was such a nice little fella, Andy."

"Mr. Bellarkin," Copeland ground the words out from the side of his mouth, eyes bitter, "said once that he'd studied to be a' army officer. I heard 'im tellin' the parson an' his wife that. Seemed like, to hear 'im spout, he'd studied ever'thing. I guess he told 'em what to do here, Race."

Jackson was like an iron statue on an iron horse. The camp below was about four miles away. All the way to it were the signs of the fight: bedding, pots and pans dropped here and there, now and then the charred remains of a wagon or a cart. Bodies, of men, women and children or dead horses, mules or oxen had been left behind at every mile. Red hell cut loose after some fool had ordered that wild dash!

"They tried to stop four times," he whispered, studying a narrow, mile-long stretch of the canyon below. "Each time they tried to make another fight of it. They never had a chance. How many wagons you think they have left down there, Red Bird?"

"Cottonwoods hide some of 'em." Copeland was leaning forward in his saddle, staring intently. "I'd say they've lost at least twenty, countin' here an' what I can see on down the slope. Look Jackson, they're still fightin'! There goes a charge! Gawd A'mighty, them red's must be mighty sure of themselves this time!"

"They should be." Jackson's stiff figure did not move. "There must be seven to one of them against the whites, and they know by now that there is no real leadership against them. We've got to do something, Red Bird. We can't let them be wiped out."

But they could not rush it, not with the number of men they could spare. Cooler, more collected every minute, Race sat watching. The Indians were a running circle now around the ring of the train, puffs of smoke jerking from their rifles, and the steady bursts of smoke from the train pouring back at them.

"You can't desert us." Ashur Thistledown spoke behind Jackson now as if reading his thoughts. "My God A'mighty, Jackson, you can't! Why, we've got women an' children—"

"An' maybe," sneered Copeland, firing him a cut-throat glance, "they ain't got narry yap an' woman down there!"

They turned back, having to tear themselves away from the sight below. The job now was to wheel-lock the train on the rim and get it ready for a stand-off. There was an ideal place for it two hundred yards to westward. Here the plateau came out to the edge of a blue cliff that dropped straight downward for eighty feet. They half-circled the train about it. While the job was being completed, Jackson, old man Brandon and Red Bird Bill

Copeland made their plans, and one of those plans included Ashur Thistledown.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Long Trail of Scalps

WITH a sinking heart and another prayer on his lips, Parson Joe Goodnight watched the shadows of nightfall start their gloomy creep. It was still blood and gunsmoke in the canyon. Goodnight did not know what had become of his Andy. He could cling only to a faint hope that Andy, being so small, might have scooted away in the darkness to find a safe hiding place. Young Joe was all right, except for an arrow wound in his left arm that had cut the upper muscle like a knife.

They had not gone on quite into Fort Laramie after all. Mr. Bellarkin, fearing the cholera, had talked them out of that when they reached a little town twenty miles east of Laramie, a place known only as Camp 44. But they had had their troubles, several breakdowns even among some of the new wagons. At that they had been making good time, they had thought. Bellarkin had pretended to know everything. He had boasted from the start that he had been West before. It later turned out that it had been a steamboat trip up the Missouri to the mouth of the Yellowstone.

It had been Roderick Bellarkin, falling back on his supposed military schooling, who had taken charge of the camps, pointing out the sites and showing a lot of new wrinkles in the way the wagons could be arranged. Captain Race Jackson had seemed old-fashioned and too confounded methodical in his ways until the blow had fallen there around the little spring of clear, icy water on the slope.

Every man and woman in the train knew now that it had been a mistake to break and run for better shelter that morning at sunrise just after the Indians had appeared to give up the fight. It had been only a trick, blast them!

But spilled milk was spilled milk. Parson Joe Goodnight was doing the best he could, and no one was taking orders any longer from Mr. Bellarkin, though Bellarkin was still around, shouting commands even now. He meant all right. Everybody knew that, but half the time he was merely in the way. He came strolling up, carefully powdered face glowing now that there was another lull in the fighting and he could again be the fine gentleman—the only man in the train who had even dared to think about such a thing as a shave.

"I think," he began, thoroughly certain of himself even yet, "that we had better prepare to make another rush for it. We can't remain here. This is not a true military battle. We can't surrender as all have agreed. There is no quarter to be hoped for. The Indians will only kill and scalp to the last man, woman and child. Take, for instance, just another mile-long dash. That will take us up the canyon to that big, high flat. Once on the flat—"

"MR. BELLARKIN, please!" cut in the preacher, wearily, "we ain't moving no more; we've moved our last time. That's all been decided. We can't move! God knows we've tried it, and we've lost more people each time."

"But," cried Bellarkin, "we can't sit here like pigeons on a roof and die, Reverend Goodnight!"

"We are dying, yes," intoned the preacher, looking all around, at the wounded, at the dying, the already dead. "But let us die together this time. Nobody in this train is going to move."

"Have it your way!" shrugged Bellarkin, eyes flashing. "I might say I expected your opposition. And that has been the trouble!" His voice lifted, fists clenching. "No unity of command. That was the main fault with Napoleon at Waterloo—"

"Only you ain't Napoleon," cut in the preacher, his dander rising, "and this ain't Waterloo. To tell the truth I never read much about Mr. Napoleon, but while we're about it, there'll be no more men sent out at night to try to break through to that soldier camp you claim they'll find twenty-five or thirty miles north of here on the Big Horn. They don't get through. It's a waste of lives."

"How do you know they don't get through?" demanded Bellarkin. "We were told back in Camp Forty-four that soldiers are there. We've sent only three men, one of them no more than a boy—"

"And three and thirty-one makes thirty-

WHEN Del Ransom rode home to the Rancho Valverde, he found, instead of old Yankee Ben's famed hospitality, a murder-trap set and baited by the most ruthless gang of killers in the history of New Mexico! Don't miss "Slave-Master of Hell's Rancho" by Cliff M. Bisbee, in the September ACE-HIGH. On sale now!

four," cut in the preacher. "We've lost thirty-one lives in the fightin, twenty-one men, four women and six children, and others are dying now."

"Race Jackson, I suppose," Bellarkin's lips curled, "would have saved them all?"

"Well," Goodnight colored, "he was a cavalry captain during the war—"

"A damned Rebel with Lee!"

"No matter!" Goodnight spread his hands emptily. "Bad as I hate to say it, we could use Satan right now—if he just knew a lot about fighting and was sure to be on our side."

"I might have known," snapped in Bellarkin, about to turn angrily away, "I wouldn't get anywhere talking to a plain. simple-minded damned fool!"

IT WAS then that raw and bleeding nerves could stand no more. Parson Joe Goodnight hit him. It was a wild swing of a right arm, as awkwardly done as a woman throwing a ball. Any man with a smattering of fighting skill could have stepped back a pace to allow the big, pine-hard fist to miss by a yard.

Roderick Bellarkin's surprise overpowered him, made him foolish. He had certainly never thought of the simple, ever-patient Goodnight as a man who would lift a hand to fight. He caught the blow squarely on the jaw, and it was like the kick of a Missouri mule. It sent him sprawling to his right, the point of the shoulder and the side of his face striking the ground while the rest of him was still in the air.

"Lord, Pa, don't!" Young Joe Goodnight had bounded up, left arm in a sling, face white from terror and the loss of blood. "You've said you never hit a man in your life. Wait, please, Mr. Bellarkin! Pa's nerves are on edge! He didn't aim in his heart to do it!"

With another fine hat a wad on the ground behind him, Bellarkin was up, coming in, a rushing bull on the charge. The preacher, realizing what he had done, leaped behind Young Joe, a man ready to get down on his knees and beg forgiveness. He never had a chance to beg. A furious smashing of fists seemed to tear Young Joe off the ground. He went back against his crouching father, and then down, battered into unconsciousness quicker than one could snap his fingers.

"Even God can't hit a Bellarkin without a fight!" Bellarkin was a raging madman as he faced the older Goodnight now. "I've never wanted to hit a preacher, but you've struck a Bellarkin, and, by God, you're going to have to fight!"

A crowd of men yelled and rushed toward them. They were not quick enough. Bellarkin had swung in, crouching and weaving. The older man had his hands up when the fists slammed to his face. his jaw and chin. The rain of blows lifted him, turned him in the air. He went down all in a wad a yard beyond Young Joe, but Bellarkin was still after him. His right foot shot out with a vicious kick. It caught Goodnight on the thigh.

All that should have been more than enough, but the madman was not yet spent inside Roderick Bellarkin. He started to jump now, to come down on Goodnight with both feet. A noise sounded instead. It was like a great, ringing gong inside his head. Stars snapped, broke and showered into a thousand colored lights in front of his eyes. Without a sound he pitched face-forward on the trampled grass, the blood flying from his torn scalp.

"Hurrah for the gal!" bawled a big Missourian. "That's what I call puttin' a fire out with one belt!"

Henrietta Goodnight stood frozen, wondering how she came to be there. She looked down at her hands. They were white, bloodless. In them was the long, octagon barrel of an old muzzle-loader hog-rifle. At the other end of the barrel, just beyond the filigreed silver trigger-guard, the stock was broken, the splinters showing.

"I—I didn't intend to hit him!" she stammered. "I—I just wanted to make him let Pa and Young Joe alone!"

"You're a hairbrained hussy an' fair bound to come to some bad end!" cried another voice. It was her mother, over to her right, a tall, sharp-jawed woman with her hair slicked back and wound into a knot at the nape of her neck. She stood with her hands balled into fists on her hips, faded gray eyes sheening.

"Now just open them fool eyes of yours an' look what you've done gone an' done to poor Mr. Bellarkin! You'll wind up in one of them low-down honkytonks yet, an' you mark my word if that ain't true!"

THE drivers of Bellarkin's two big wagons picked him up with all the tenderness they could muster and carried him away. He still had other friends in the train, men who would stick to him in spite of the devil. There was Lige Pedley, the red-headed, wildly-bearded Missourian Race Jackson had taken in hand. Pedley was always the loud mouth, ready to start trouble, but he kept his tongue here.

Black scowls and rumbling voices were enough to tell him that Bellarkin had really put his foot into trouble this time, and any one opening his mouth in defense of the man was apt to get a fist shoved into it.

Pedley's wife, a big, low-browed, black-haired woman, claimed to be something of a nurse and had been helping Henrietta Goodnight and four other women with the wounded. She took charge of Bellarkin, bathing his head and bemoaning his fate in a honeyed voice. She closed the long, ugly tear in his scalp

where the hammer of the old rifle had ripped through the skin. The blow had been a glancing one, catching Bellarkin on the head and shoulder, otherwise it would have crushed the skull like an eggshell.

Once he was back to consciousness and on his feet, the elder Joe Goodnight apologized to everybody. He went over to Bellarkin while Liz Pedley was bandaging his head. Bellarkin listened to him sullenly. He glowered at Young Joe, and that was all.

There was not a word out of him. He was the martyr, the lion who had been wounded only because he wanted to help out in a great cause. That was his expression. He kept it, and the close little knot of friends around him only mumbled behind their hands and fired hurt glances at the others.

Henrietta Goodnight apologized to no one, not even her mother. A strange, new light had come into her eyes. Her mother followed her, grumbling in a low voice. The girl ignored her as she returned to the task of caring for the wounded. A baby, wounded by a rifle ball that had come through the side of a big wagon in the afternoon, died in her arms just as the last of the light fled from the higher canyon rim to eastward.

Parson Joe had been using all the help he could get to throw up a ring of earthworks beyond the poorly-circled wagons. He had seen such things on visits to army camps to preach to the sick and wounded during the war between the North and South. There was only a vague idea in his mind about them or how the work should be done. Mr. Bellarkin offered no help this time.

When real night was at hand they lay waiting, their guns ready. Young Joe lay beside his father, still able to shoot with one hand and one arm, and back in Missouri he had been able to knock a squirrel's eye out at an even hundred paces. Parson Joe had spread down his handkerchief and laid his New Testament firmly on the ridge of upturned earth in front of him. On it he had placed his rifle.

"It ought to make me shoot a little better," he told his son. "I'm such a poor hand at taking blood."

He prayed for Andy, still clinging to his faint hope; he prayed for all of them, even for the forgiveness of the sins of the Indians he knew were out there in the dark. He was still praying when Henrietta came up just before midnight with a long old rifle. Henrietta had also been a good squirrel-shooter back in Missouri, and every man, woman and boy had to fight now. Gold helped those who helped themselves!

The Indians kept them waiting and waiting. The canyon was about fourteen hundred yards wide here. Out there in the dark there were innumerable places for the big bands of near-naked savages to hide, even in daylight. Not a sound broke the stillness beyond the train.

IT CAME around two o'clock in the morning. Coyotes had been heard wailing in the distance to northward around one o'clock. Now, five or six hundred yards away, a longer, fiercer wail arose. To any ear not trained to know the difference, it was a wolf's sad calling to his pack on some far-away hill. Parson Joe knew, and said one more prayer.

"Get set." The whispering started and ran around the train.

And then they were coming, first a flight of arrows, a ring of yelling and crying that made one's blood run cold, and then the low but rapidly growing pound of hoofs.

"Remember, everybody!" called out Parson Joe. *"Remember!"*

Blades of fire tore through the darkness out there. The whites held, men biting their lips, guns waiting. The Indians charged in, drew back, and charged again, the bullets raining on the wagons and through them. A horse inside the train bawled in agony and went down. Somebody's dog now had courage enough to bark.

"Remember!" wailed the preacher. *"Remember!"*

"They're remembering, Pa," half-whimpered Young Joe. "They're holdin' their fire."

"God, please see our side!" Somebody else was praying a minute later. "We ain't done them God-damn' redskins no wrong!"

"Hallelulah!"

"Amen!"

"Remember!"

The third attack was coming, the ground appearing to tremble under the furious pounding of the hoofs. Closer and closer swept the Indians, bolder now than ever. The fire was terrible. Many a redskin out there had a repeating rifle as well as his bow and arrows. Indian fashion, they were about to break and wheel back when Parson Joe Goodnight gave the command:

"Open fire!"

It burst all around, the crashing and roaring ring of it. Everywhere one looked, shadowy shapes were tumbling from their ponies, some still clutched tightly to the manes, the ponies wheeling and dragging them away.

"Lord, look down!" wailed the preacher, shooting like a man possessed by a demon. "Look down! *Look down!"*

"Listen, Pa!" The girl clutched his arm as the charge fell back out of range. "I—I hear something out there! In the north! Up—up the canyon! Listen!"

"It's the ringing of the firing in our ears." Goodnight turned and patted her back. "Load your rifle, child, load!"

"But, Pa, listen!" cried Young Joe. "Listen, everybody!"

It was coming again, sweeping along on the wind, getting closer all the time under a dark night without a moon or a single star in the sky. It rolled faintly, then stronger, becoming one far-flung wave after another on the air.

"Lord, hit's a bugle!" groaned a Missourian somewhere off to the right against the earthworks. "Hit's a bugle acallin'!"

"Why wouldn't it be!" Roderick Bellarkin's voice filled the inside of the train. "Who is the fool, the brave man or the coward now? Didn't I send for the soldiers on the Big Horn? What appreciation did I get for it outside of a broken head? Look! Listen! The reds are breaking and going down the canyon! We've whipped them out! Whipped them out, I tell you! Do you hear me? I'm speaking to that preaching Joe Goodnight! Are you listening, Goodnight?"

The preacher did not answer him. The Indians were going, not daring to try to escape to northward and run into a trap. That in itself was enough. The bugle was sweeping closer. Soon a noise of hoofs were coming out of the darkness. A white man's voice called to the train: "Hold your fire! Bring your guns and follow us!"

"Who the hell was that?" cried Bellarkin as riders swept past the camp, hot after the Indians, the bugle still blowing. "Damn it, I've heard that voice before."

"You have, yes, sir, Mr. Bellarkin." Goodnight was up, his voice meek as he wiped icy balls of perspiration from his brow. "That was Captain Jackson, Mr. Bellarkin. I think we'd better follow 'im like he said. Let every other man come and bring his gun with him!"

CHAPTER FIVE

"Blow, Damn Yuh, Blow!"

ASHUR THISTLEDOWN had not lied about having been one of the best buglers in the Ohio Volunteers. Jackson had heard him blasting loose a number of times on a battered old army bugle he carried on his wagon. Thistledown had been a shade too old to see much of the front-line fighting in the war, but that had no effect on his blowing.

Only eleven men had come sweeping down that canyon. Jackson knew it from end to end. The nearest place in or out of it, except to southward, was seven or eight miles above the stricken wagon-train. Taking advantage of the dark night, feeling reasonably certain that the Indians had not discovered the smaller train on the rim of the plateau, he had laid his plans accordingly. Only a daring surprise, timed to come at the psychological moment, was needed to carry them out.

The far-flung notes of an army bugle in the dark was always damnation to a band of Indians. Indians had been tricked by the same ruse many times, but it was one trump card that rarely failed. It was the paleface's strongest medicine. Tricked once or twice, and many an Indian had laughed at what he thought was only another paleface scare the next time—and there was where he died.

Troops of calvary were everywhere, riding the hills by day and by night, and when one laughed at a bugle he might be laughing at hell itself.

Riding hard, the reds went down the canyon, leaving their dead behind just as Jackson had planned it for them. Within two miles they could have scattered, vanishing in pairs and little groups like hawks in the hills, to meet at an agreed rendezvous and wait for a better time to strike.

But Race Jackson knew Indians inside and out. He spoke Chinook, the trade jargon of the plains, and seven or eight of the languages and dialects of the various tribes as well. This thing was his big gamble, the one bold thrust to end it quickly.

Now the fleeing Indians were going into a trap all set and baited for them. By the time they had fled a thousand yards down the canyon, they were entering the mile-long narrow strip. Here those towering walls curved in to form a long pocket no more than two hundred and fifty yards wide. In the pocket the showdown would come. Men under the command of two of Red Bird Bill Copeland's fighting hellions were already hiding behind rocks, their guns ready to block the south end so completely a gopher would not get through their tight line.

Men were also on the rims, ready to play the deadliest part of the plot. One of Race Jackson's wagons had carried an even two thousand sticks of dynamite, to be sold to miners when he opened his big store at Lookout Bend. Along with the dynamite were the necessary coils of fuse and detonating caps.

Pencils had punched holes into four hundred sticks of the dynamite. Caps had been placed on the same number of short lengths of fuse, the fuses had been split with the caps crimped on, then pushed home, and everything was ready.

"THEY'RE goin' in!" Old Anvil Brandon spoke as if he had been holding his breath a long time, as he came galloping in from Jackson's left and raced along beside him. "If only Red Bird'll hold them fellas on the rims long enough to let 'em all inside, then it's goin' to be like droppin' rocks on a pile of snakes in a dry well. Hell, they just can't miss, close as them walls are, Race!"

The bugle called again, louder, wilder. Once

forced to take a hand in the game, Ashur Thistledown was really beginning to like it; he was blowing as he had never blown before. Once out of this battle, and he would be calling himself a seasoned Indian fighter. Probably the man who had licked every dad-blamed Indian in Montana!

"They're in, Race!" Brandon's voice was a groan of triumph at last. "We've got ever' damn' one of 'em! Blow, Ashur, *blow!*"

"Open fire!" yelled Jackson. "Give 'em hell!"

While Thistledown was still blowing, the others opened up with their revolvers, each man firing from either hand. Some of the Indians fired back wildly at them. The flashes of gunfire there only lighted up the last of the reds racing into the trap. A furious cheering lifted from the whites.

"More comin' from the Goodnight train!" bawled Brandon. "The parson an' a whole string of 'em ridin' bareback."

The first tinge of the light was just appearing in the east. Not even a wizard could have timed it any more exactly. The Indians, not yet knowing what was in store for them, were plunging on. When Jackson and Brandon reached the right place, they were pulling up and throwing themselves out of their saddles. Now Ashur Thistledown dropped off his horse. He braced himself, bugle to his lips and blew three long sharp blasts that seemed to swell forward, up and all over the hills.

"There she goes!"

It was only a sputtering thin streak of fire in the distance at first, a long-curving glide through the air from the rim. A dull yellow flash of light took its place, the explosion shaking the earth. Behind that tremendous report came the sounds of rifles firing at the other end of the trap—only a faint tapping in the silence after the first blast.

"They know they're cut off now!" cried Jackson. "Get ready to hold them when they start their drive-back!"

"Blow, *damn yuh,* Ashur, *blow!*"

Twenty revolvers blazed. Thistledown was squatting behind a big rock, blowing his damndest. The murderous rake of the fire turned the reds again, sending them fleeing back. Dynamite really started raining down on them now, rocks and brush going to bits, the dust and grayish smoke shooting into boiling clouds that soon blotted out everything.

"We've got 'em!"

"Blow, *damn yuh, Ashur, blow!*"

RODERICK BELLARKIN was like a man in a stupor. He had no plans for the moment; he could not think of the exact thing to do as he sat on the end of the coupling-pole behind his forward wagon listening to the fighting down the canyon. Race Jackson and his damned cheap dramatics had just about spoiled everything.

If Henrietta Goodnight had not come along, he might have found a better answer to his troubles than the one he finally took. The girl was looking for something. He saw what it was in a few moments. In his excitement Parson Joe Goodnight had rushed away, leaving his New Testament there on the earthworks.

"Henrietta, I must talk to you. Wait, please!" He spread his arms as she wheeled and started to move past him. "I love you."

"Would you please," she cut in, "stand out of my way?"

"No, by God, I won't!" he told her, doggedly. "Bellarkins have been fighting men in this country for more than one hundred and fifty years. We are not quitters, Henrietta."

"Will you let me pass!"

"By God, no!" he snarled.

Her hand came up and slapped him a fierce blow across the face, staggering him back.

"Henrietta!" The low, cold voice of the girl's mother came out of the shadows. "Henrietta, you'll listen to me. God knows I didn't aim to eavesdrop, but—"

"Mother!"

"Yes, 'mother'—you fool." The woman's voice was still low, jarring and grating on the nerves like the harsh sound of metal scraping flint. "Not too many folks in this train know I married your preachin' fool of a father when you were five years old. But I've been a mother, the only one you ever really knew. I've been that to Young Joe. He tries to mind me, tries to appreciate. Me, a Cartwright of Virginia, marryin' a preacher, livin' on charity—"

"Father has always worked his fields!"

"Shut your mouth!" hissed the woman.

SHE REACHED behind her. An old muzzle-loader rifle stood leaning against the big wagon there. She swung it forward. In a second she had whipped the seasoned hickory ramrod free and had dropped the rifle on the ground.

"If I have to beat you," the woman's breath half-whistled, "I'll shore God start in here an' now.

"Henrietta!" They must have heard that shrill cry all over the train. The woman had stepped forward, ramrod in her hand, an insane light blazing in her eyes, mouth open as if to scream. "I'll whip the hell out of— Oh!"

Mrs. Goodnight had taken only that one pace. She had stiffened, the ramrod lifted like a sword. Out of the darkness from eighty yards away a slender shaft had flung, the pretty feathers on its hilt quivering in a wind of its own making. The head of the arrow drove true. It went in under the upraised arm

(Continued on page 95)

A GUN-GHOST'S REBELS

Doc Kellem's shot centered the bucket

Jim Fayette had sworn a solemn, grave-side oath to forsake forever the paths of red violence which had baptised him with his dreaded nickname. . . . Yet, now that Dobie Dan was dead, who could carry on that grim crusade—unless the deadly Fanner Fayette once more rode the killer's trail?

CHAPTER ONE

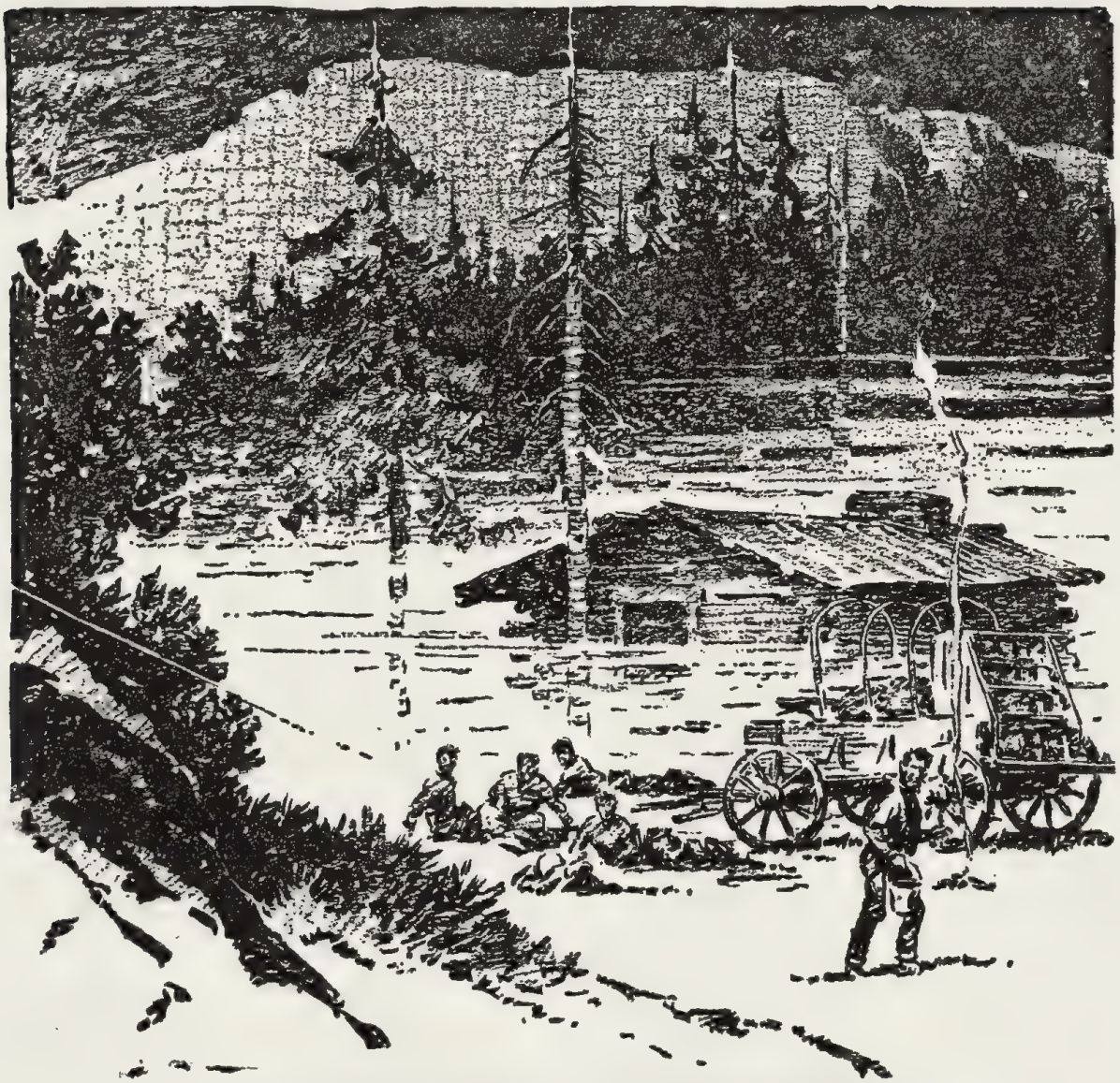
The Devil's Ramrod

A PLUME of sun-sparkled dust rose above the barren flats just west of Reservation. It raveled out into breeze-blown streamers that drifted across Main Street and finally settled against Cemetery Hill at the north end of town. There was an omen in the dust's journey; a kind of sign that men might read. But the three men on the Palace Hotel's second-floor gallery didn't see the dust; they were watching the ten riders behind it.

Jim Fayette, youngest of the trio on the gallery, said, "Haggin believes in coming to town well heeled."

Fayette was ramrod of Pardee-Shannon's big Spur spread, and he looked gaunt as one

FIGHT IN HELL!



Novel of Freedom-Loving Renegades

By L. Ernenwein

of the Spur's slat-ribbed steers. Ten months of drouth and toil on the Border Desert range had honed him down. Those months had put a questing squint in his smoke-blue eyes and stamped haggard lines on his angular, sun-blackened face. But they hadn't shrunk his devil-be-damned grin, nor changed his rash ways.

"Haggin always did like lots of company," Branch Shannon reflected, and glanced at Dobie Dan Pardee, who'd been his partner for twenty years. "Far back as I can remember, Shad Haggin never rode alone."

"I can recall when he did most of his riding in the dark of the moon," old Dobie Dan declared, sitting with his saddle-warped legs astraddle of the chair. "Mark my words, Branch, we'll have to fight Shad Haggin and his Bootjack bunch, no matter which way the trial goes tomorrow."

They looked a lot alike, these two old Texans who'd migrated west at the end of Lee's Lost Rebellion. But actually they were direct opposites in many ways, for Shannon had the conservative mind of a cautious, peace-loving businessman, whereas Dobie Dan belonged to the hell-for-leather breed of cowmen who considered a .45 the best court of appeal.

Glancing at these two partners now, and comparing them with Shad Haggin who was leading his riders along Main Street, Jim Fayette felt apprehension. There'd been a time when Pardee-Shannon ruled the roost in this end of Arizona, but that day was gone. Bootjack was the big outfit now. Using all the tricks of bribery, night-riding and murder from ambush, Haggin had driven a hundred-mile wedge between Spur's Border breeding-grounds and its summer range in the north.

"I still think you shoulda jumped Haggin when he first started crowding the small outfits off the Spanish Grant," Fayette said quietly. "There was just one reason he wanted that dried-up country—so he could close the Spanish Grant Trail and blockade us out of business."

Branch Shannon lit a fresh cigar and considered Fayette with an old man's patience. "Just because your fast gun-fanning once saved Dan from being 'dobe-walled down in Sonora doesn't mean that every problem can be solved with slugs," he said. "This isn't Mexico, Jim, and it's not Border Desert. This is northern Arizona. We've got law courts here."

"Tin-star law and crooked courts!" Dobie Dan snorted. Shad Haggin owns 'em body an' soul. That don't do any good, Branch!"

"Maybe not." Shannon admitted patiently. "But they're a start, and the day will come when we'll have real law and justice in this country."

A cynical smile quirked Jim Fayette's long lips. "By that time the Spur's south range will be a boneyard," he said. "The Rio Pago went dry a week ago. In another two weeks there'll be dust in half the tanks and waterholes from Apache Flats to Sonora."

"If we don't git rain down there *muy pronto* we'll have to drive everything north this year," Dobie Dan announced. "Breeder stock, yearlin' calves and beef steers—the whole damn' caboodle!"

Shannon, who ran the Spur's headquarters ranch in the Tonto country north of Reservation, seldom saw the Border Desert range any more. But because he kept Spur's tally books, he knew how large a trail herd such a drive would involve. "Upwards of five thousand head," he mused frowningly.

Then he asked, "You got that deed to the Spanish Grant Trail, Dan?"

Pardee nodded. He patted his hip pocket and chuckled. "Shad Haggin will be considerable surprised when we spring it in court tomorrow. Funny thing is, I'd of been satisfied with a jawbone agreement from Fonso Chavez fifteen years ago when I dickered for that right-of-way across his land. But old Fonso was proud of bein' able to write English, so he ciphered it all out in ink, purty as you please."

JIM FAYETTE watched the Bootjack bunch dismount at Gilligan's Livery farther down the street. He gave Haggin's riders a calculating appraisal. There was no doubt that the hawk-faced owner of Bootjack had hired a hardcase crew. For even though Fayette recognized only three of them—Red Bastable, Haggin's beefy, buck-toothed foreman; Kid Carmody, who'd ridden with the Wild Bunch in Texas; and the Mex halfbreed Santana—the others bore the same slug-slammer brand. They made an impressive show of strength, those ten gunhung men; a threatening, convincing show.

Fayette was thinking about that, and all the other riders on Bootjack's big payroll, when the screen door opened behind him and he turned to see Sheriff Jube Dawson in the gallery doorway.

"Howdy, men," the big-bellied lawman greeted, his jowly face showing its usual whisky flush.

Branch Shannon said civilly, "Hello, Sheriff."

But Dobie Dan didn't speak. He just stared contemptuously at Dawson's silver star, and Fayette did likewise.

"Came up to tell you I'm making a special rule in the interests of law and order," Dawson announced. "From now until the trial is over everybody has to check their guns. Don't want no shootin' scrapes to spoil the legal showdown between Spur and Bootjack."

"Good idea," Shannon agreed, plainly pleased. "Spur will obey the rule one hundred per cent."

"So will everybody else," Dawson declared pompously, and turned back into the hotel.

It occurred to Fayette that the sheriff stepped lightly for so big a man, making scarcely any noise as he walked along the hallway. It was funny he'd never noticed it before. Presently, seeing Gail Shannon come out of the Bon Ton Millinery, he forgot about the sheriff.

She was something to see, this sorrel-haired daughter of Branch Shannon; something to stir a man's blood. Especially when he hadn't seen her for almost three months. . . .

"Guess I'll take a little look around," Fayette said casually, getting to his feet.

"Don't forget to leave your gun at the desk downstairs," Shannon reminded; and then, catching sight of his daughter on the sidewalk exclaimed, "So that's it!"

Fayette grinned and went quickly inside.

Dobie Dan said, "They'll make a fine pair, Branch. And I'll be glad to see 'em git hitched, bein' as how Jim is the nearest thing to a son a bachelor ever had."

"I guess they'd get married whether we liked it or not," Shannon said. Then he added thoughtfully, "Jim has made the Spur a good ramrod, Dan—but I'm not forgetting that they called him Fanner Fayette down in Sonora, before he went to work for us."

Dobie Dan grinned. "Hell, he was just a harum-scarum kid takin' a look-see over the hill. That was five years ago, Branch, and Jim is only twenty-four now. He shucked his renegade ways the day he signed on with Spur."

JIM stood on the hotel steps watching Gail Shannon come along the sidewalk, taking in the familiar and lovely picture she made. She wore a perky little black hat tilted forward on her high-coiled hair, and a velvet dress that was the exact blue-gray color of campfire smoke on a windless morning. She stopped to chat with Effie Sprague. While Fayette waited, Pancho Garcia stepped up to the hotel veranda with a small silver trinket in his hand.

"Good luck charm," the ragged little urchin said eagerly. "You buy heem, Señor Jeem?"

Fayette grinned, recalling the other times this same Pancho had sold him good-luck charms made from peso silver by a widowed mother, and supposedly blessed by the mission padre.

"I lost fifty dollars playing poker right after I bought the last one," Fayette said with mock gravity.

"But weethout eet you would 'ave lost much more *dinero,*" Pancho offered cagily. "Perhaps one 'undred dollars. Thees one ees—what you say—the spashal charm. Weel breeng you *mucho fortuna!*"

Jim grinned and took the charm. He was handing Pancho two silver dollars when Shad Haggin and the Bootjack crew came along the sidewalk, so close that Fayette saw Haggin's lidless black eyes tighten perceptibly as the cattle king glanced up at him.

"Muchas gracias!" Pancho exclaimed, so excited at receiving the extra dollar that he tripped as he went down the steps—and would have fallen headlong except that he bumped into Shad Haggin.

The collision brought an angry curse from the Bootjack boss. "You stinking beggar brat!" he snapped, and grasping Pancho's arm, clouted him alongside the ear with his open hand.

The impact of Haggin's hand sounded familiar to Jim Fayette, and so did the whimper that came from Pancho's lips; it brought flashing, bitter memories of his own hard-scrabble boyhood. He said sharply, "Take your paws off him, Haggin!"

Astonishment bugged Haggin's eyes and loosened his thin-lipped mouth. He stared up at Fayette. "You gone loco?" he demanded, still grasping Pancho's arm.

"Mebbeso," Fayette said, coming down the steps. "But I'm telling you to turn the kid loose, *muy pronto!*"

Branch Shannon leaned over the upper railing and called urgently, "Wait a minute, Jim—take it easy!"

But Fayette wasn't waiting. In two long strides he reached Shad Haggin, knocked the cattle king's hand loose from Pancho's sleeve. He said, "If you want to slap somebody, take a try at me."

Then he heard Dobie Dan yell, "Look out for Bastable!"

Fayette turned instantly, saw Red Bastable swing, and tried to block the Bootjack foreman's big fist. But he didn't have time. Bastable's knuckles exploded against his jaw with an impact that sent him reeling off the sidewalk.

For a strangely suspended interval then, Jim Fayette had no clear impression of what was happening. He was remotely aware of excited voices roundabout, of fists battering his face and the smell of boot-churned dust in his nostrils. But that first sneak blow had put a dancing red haze in front of his eyes, and Fayette couldn't see Red Bastable's swinging fists at all.

Backing blindly with each blow, Fayette retreated down Main Street like a drunkard desperately endeavoring to keep his feet. Vaguely, as from a far distance, he heard a man yell. "Knock him down, Red—knock him down!"

And Bastable: "Not till I've spoiled his good looks some more!"

Presently some of the haze cleared from Fayette's eyes and he caught a blurred glimpse of Bastable's grinning face in front of him. Seeing a blood-smeared fist poised to swing, Fayette swiveled sideways in time to evade it. Taking advantage of this momentary respite, he staggered away from Bastable, as if endeavoring to escape through the yawning doorway of Gilligan's Livery.

"He's runnin' away from you!" Kid Carmody howled.

Fayette wasn't running away. He was merely trying to gain time enough for his eyes to focus properly—for his shock-fogged senses to regain some semblance of normal perception. But Bastable was taking no chances; the redhead was charging in for the kill.

Turning swiftly, Fayette met that charge head-on, driving his left shoulder against Bastable's broad body and smashing a right to the red-head's face. But there was no power in the blow. Bastable slugged Fayette with both fists, the meaty sound of those blows echoed by the redhead's gloating laughter. Fayette tried to go into a clinch, but it was no

use. Bastable's sledging fists hammered him back. Blood ran into his eyes, blinding him again. And then something exploded against his left ear with a deafening, paralyzing impact.

Jim Fayette fell like a broken reed.

CHAPTER TWO

Backshoot Destiny

WHEN Fayette opened his eyes he was aware of the livery stable's rank odor and a curious wetness, as if rain had been beating against his face. Then he recognized Jock Gilligan standing over him with a water bucket. The little liveryman said, "Bastable never give you a chance. The dirty son sneaked up on you."

Almost at once then, Dobie Dan Pardee came rushing up with a whisky bottle in his hand. Kneeling beside Fayette in the stable doorway, the old cowman pulled the cork. "Take a swig, Jimmy boy."

Fayette hunched up on an elbow and put the bottle to his swollen, broken lips.

"How you feel now?" Dobie Dan asked.

The whisky's hot jolt dissolved the fuzzy feeling in Fayette's head. He stood up, grinning sheepishly. "I've felt worse and lived."

Branch Shannon and Gail came into the stable, and Gail exclaimed, "Jim, are you all right?"

Fayette nodded. A self-mocking smile creased his fist-scarred face and he drawled, "I'm just dandy."

The girl came quickly to him, her slim fingers exploring a blood-crusted gash on his cheek. "It was awful," she said. "I—I thought he was going to kill you."

Fayette felt better then. A familiar, warming glow came to him, deep inside, like it always did when she was near him.

Branch Shannon asked, "Why the hell'd you start such a rumpus over a Mexican kid, Jim?"

Disapproval was strong in Shannon's eyes. And something else; something like disappointment.

Fayette searched for words to answer the question—for a way to explain why he could never leave an uneven fight alone. He knew it was part and parcel of his boyhood, spawned by the brutal abuse he'd rebelled against as a kid. But he couldn't put it into words.

So he said, "Reckon I just felt like fighting." He saw Shannon's frown mirrored on Gail's oval face.

"This isn't the time nor the place for that," Shannon protested. "We've got a good chance to win our case tomorrow, which would mean forcing Bootjack to remove its fence from the Spanish Grant Trail. But street-fighting isn't going to help our case; it'll only prejudice the judge against us."

"Hell's bells!" Dobie Dan blurted. "Jim only done what any fit man would do!"

But Shannon shook his head. "I didn't ask you and Jim to travel all the way up here from Border Desert just to stage Good Samaritan stunts on Main Street," he declared stubbornly. "This is a legal fight that won't be won with fists, or guns. Keep that in mind, Jim, and act accordingly."

Then he said, "Come on, Gail," and taking his daughter's arm, strode from the stable.

For a time, while Jock Gilligan went about his barn chores, Fayette and Pardee sat talking in the stable tackroom.

"Branch is a good galoot," Dobie Dan explained. "But he don't see things like you and me, Jim. He's hell for law and order—thinks the gun-grabbin' days are over. But he'll learn different, *muy pronto.* Shad Haggin won't open the Trail to us, no matter what the judge says tomorrow. We'll have to bust Bootjack's blockade with guns, or give up our south range. And I ain't givin' it up long as I got strength enough to trip a trigger!"

AFTERWARD, when they'd had supper at the cafe, Dobie Dan said, "Reckon you'll be wanting to visit with Gail. I'll go over to the Belladonna and see if they've got a poker game goin' in the back room. I beat them boys for quite a chunk, last time we came to town."

Fayette grinned. "Dab it on 'em," he urged. "I'll come over about midnight and help you tote away your winnings."

He headed for the hotel and was passing a dark alley just beyond the Blue Bull Saloon when a man stepped out of the shadows and said quietly, "Hello, Fayette."

Not recognizing the voice, Fayette halted. An ingrained wariness sent his hand to holster, forgetting he'd checked his gun at the hotel. He said, "Howdy," and peered at the dusk-veiled face, trying to identify it.

"I'm Gus Odegarde," the man said, still speaking low. "I had a little outfit on the Spanish Grant, remember?"

"Yeah," Fayette said, recalling that Odegarde had asked Spur for help when Bootjack started crowding him off the grass. But Spur had refused to interfere, and recently there'd been talk that Odegarde had turned to rustling.

"I ain't got much love for Spur," Odegarde murmured. "But I got a lot less for Bootjack. And there's four-five more of us feel the same way."

"So?" Fayette prompted.

Odegarde built a cigarette and lit it, his lean lantern-jawed face showing briefly in the match-flare. "Well, it's bein' told around that if Spur loses the trial tomorrow there'll be

range war. And from what I hear Spur ain't got a chance to win a court verdict."

Remembering the right-of-way deed in Dobie Dan's pocket, Fayette said, "I think we've got a good chance to win."

"Shad Haggin don't think so," Odegarde reported, nodding at the Blue Bull's lamplit doorway. "He's over there now, braggin' that the trial won't last an hour—and offerin' odds of ten to one that Bootjack wins it."

Then he said softly, "I know where you could hire some gun riders. Real good ones."

"Such as who?" Fayette asked.

"Such as Doc Kellem, Alabam Bell and One-Eyed Adair."

Those names startled Jim Fayette. They belonged to three members of the old Texas Wild Bunch. "Are those boys in Arizona?" he demanded.

"Holed up back in the Hoodoo Hills right now," Odegarde said grimly. "I been ridin' with 'em. So's Charley Moss and Tod Fayle. A man has got to eat."

Fayette could understand that. He also had ridden with those same renegades for a similar reason—and might still be riding with them, if it hadn't been for Dobie Dan Pardee. He was thinking about that, and marveling at the change five years could make in a man, when Odegarde asked, "How about signin' us on?"

"No use talking about it now," Fayette said. "If you want to win some fast money, take the ten-to-one bet Haggin is offering."

"Not me," Odegarde scoffed. "I wouldn't bet a busted horseshoe on Spur's chances against that crooked son. He's slicker'n cow slobbers."

Then he asked, "You figger Spur might hire us, if there's a range fight?"

"Might," Fayette admitted. "Ask me again, when the time comes."

"Mebbeso it'll come sooner'n you think," Odegarde warned, and faded back into the alley.

GAIL SHANNON was sitting with her father on the Palace veranda when Fayette came up the steps. She called, "Over here, Jim." When he'd joined them on the long bench, Branch Shannon handed Fayette a cigar.

"Gail says I sounded pretty sharp when I talked to you at the stable," the old cowman said apologetically. "I don't blame you for hating Shad Haggin. We all hate him, but we've got to be patient."

Fayette grinned, and feeling the gentle pressure of Gail's fingers on his arm, said, "Sure—I understand how it is."

Presently, when Shannon went over to the Belladonna for his evening drink, Gail murmured softly, "It's been a long time, Jim."

Her face was scarcely more than a vague oval in the shadows here, but he could see the sweet curve of her smiling lips—could smell the remembered fragrance of her hair.

"Too darn long." he said huskily, taking her in his arms.

"Will you promise me something, Jim?" Gail asked, and when he nodded, she said, "Don't fight again while you're in Reservation—either with your fists or a gun."

"I promise," Fayette said and kissed her with the eagerness of a man long lonely.

They were still sitting there on the veranda bench at midnight when Branch Shannon came from the Belladonna. "Dan is a big winner," he reported, and went on upstairs.

"It's getting awfully late," Gail murmured. "Way past my bedtime."

But she made no move to leave. . . .

She was still there beside him, with her head on his shoulder, when Jock Gilligan rushed up the veranda steps and blurted: "Dobie Dan—he's dead!"

For a startled instant Jim Fayette sat speechless. Then he jumped to his feet, grabbed Gilligan's shoulders, his grip so strong that the little liveryman winced.

"Who killed him?" he demanded. "Who done it?"

"Don't know," Gilligan said, trembling. "They found Dan layin' dead in Belladonna Alley, with his pockets turned out and his throat cut."

Fayette was only half aware of Gail's anguished voice saying, "I'll go tell Dad."

He glanced bleakly at the street, watching two men carry a limp form toward Rudd's Undertaking Parlor, while a small group followed. He tried to build a cigarette, but his rope-calloused fingers fumbled the paper, spilling the tobacco.

And in that dismal moment Fayette remembered Gus Odegarde's warning: "Mebbeso it'll come sooner'n you think."

They buried Dan Pardee at noon, while dreary clouds hovered close and a cold rain slanted across the bleak crest of Cemetery Hill. They lowered his coffin gently and filled the grave while a preacher's solemn voice intoned final benediction—while men blinked in frowning silence and a sorrel-haired girl sobbed softly.

When it was done, when there was nothing left to do for the big-hearted old Texan, they went back down the hill. All but Jim Fayette, who stood beside the wooden cross, and Branch Shannon, who sat in the livery rig, waiting with his daughter.

"Jim, you'd better come now." Gail called finally.

But Fayette shook his head. "Don't wait for me," he said.

Branch Shannon got out of the rig and came over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I know how you feel, Jim. But there's nothing more we can do here. They refused to postpone the trial. We're due at court in half an hour."

"Court, hell!" Fayette exploded. "What good will that do now, without the right-of-way deed they stole from Dan last night?"

Shannon said patiently, "There's no proof that Haggin had anything to do with Dan's death. He didn't even know there *was* such a deed, Jim—he couldn't possibly have framed Dan's death on that account. Dan had over six hundred dollars of poker winnings with him when he left the Belladonna. That'd be enough to tempt some roustabout into laying for him, and taking everything Dan had in his pockets."

"Mebbeso," Fayette admitted, seeing the logic of Shannon's argument even though he couldn't quite believe it. "Anyway, I'm not leaving just yet. I—I just sort of want to stay with Dan a little spell longer."

Branch Shannon seldom cursed. But he did now. "Damn it to hell," he exclaimed, glancing down at the fresh-filled grave. "Damn it all to hell!"

Then he went back to the rig, and keeping his head turned away from Gail so she wouldn't see the tears in his eyes, he drove quickly down the hill. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Deal With the Damned

IT WAS coming dark when Jim Fayette trudged down Cemetery Hill. A gusty wind, raw with spring's last coldness, swept slanting sheets of rain against him; window lamplight cast its yellow shine on pools of water in Main Street and hock-deep mud sucked at his boot-heels as he crossed Belladonna Alley.

This was supper-time and the Belladonna bar was deserted save for Suds McGee. The ape-faced saloonman took one look at Fayette and reached for his private bottle of bourbon. He poured two drinks, resting his great paunch on the bar's beveled edge, and said sadly, "A dark and dismal day, me lad."

Fayette nodded, rain water dripping from his hat-brim. He asked, "Who you reckon did it, Suds?"

McGee shrugged his round shoulders.

"Wish to hell I could give ye so much as a hint," he said. "In fact I'd like to lay hands on the black-hearted spalpeen meself. They was three-four saddle tramps in here last night, a-watchin' of the poker game. But our addle-brained badge-toter says he can't find no clues that'd make him suspect 'em."

Then, as Fayette picked up his whisky glass, the saloonman raised his also, and offered a toast. "To Dan Pardee—the finest friend ye could find east or west of the Pecos, bejasus!"

"Dobie Dan," Fayette acknowledged, and taking the drink at a gulp, shivered spasmodically.

McGee filled the glasses again. He contemplated Fayette's frowning, bleak-eyed face and said, "Ye thought a lot of him, didn't ye, lad?"

Fayette nodded. He wiped his wet hands on the inside of his riding jacket and gave his attention to shaping a cigarette.

They stood in reflective silence for a time. Then Suds said, "Bootjack won the trial, hands down. Judge claimed there was no evidence to show Spur had any legal title to a trail across the Spanish Grant. That sort of gimmicks yer Border Desert ranch all to hell, don't it, Jim?"

"Mebbe not," Fayette said grimly. "Mebbe there's another way to break Bootjack's blockade—the way Dobie Dan would've done it."

He walked to the batwings, and just before he went through them, he said, "If you see Gus Odegarde, tell him I'm in room number five at the Palace."

Then he tromped up Belladonna Alley to the corner and stood for a moment, contemplating the dismal, deserted Main Street. Yesterday there'd been dust on this street; there'd been sunshine and warmth and cheerfulness. Now there was just mud, and rain, and a cold wind blowing. . . .

Remembering the good-luck charm he'd bought from Pancho Garcia, Fayette dug the trinket from his pants pocket. Good luck, hell!

He had raised his hand to throw it into the street when something stopped him. Not superstition, exactly; but a sense of loyalty to Pancho—and to the memory of a lonely kid in Texas. He dropped the silver trinket into a pocket of his riding jacket and forgot it.

Presently, as he started to cross toward the Palace Hotel, a group of riders came galloping along Main Street from Gilligan's Livery. It was impossible to identify their faces in this rain-slashed gloom, but he guessed who they were even before he heard Shad Haggin's gloating laughter. The Bootjack bunch was heading for home full of satisfaction and Blue Bull whisky. They passed so close that their bronc's hoofs splashed Fayette with muddy water and he heard Breed Santana yell drunkenly: *"Vaminos chamacos!"*

Hearing the halfbreed's voice reminded Fayette that there was a knife-scar on Santana's face. It wasn't much of a clue; yet someone had cut Dobie Dan's throat, and Breed was the type of renegade who might use a knife.

Fayette was thinking about that as he

walked to the hotel—trying to fashion a flimsy link with some remote impression he'd had yesterday; something that seemed vaguely significant. But it was still evading him when he went upstairs to the room he and Dobie Dan had shared.

BRANCH SHANNON was waiting for him.

"Suppose you've heard the news," Gail's father said wearily.

"Yeah," Fayette muttered, shedding his wet jacket. "What you plan to do now?"

Shannon made a futile, open-palmed gesture. "Only one thing left to do—appeal to a higher court."

"And what happens to our Border Desert ranch in the meantime?" Fayette demanded.

"May have to abandon it," Shannon said.

"Dobie Dan didn't intend to abandon it," Fayette declared, close to anger. "He told me he'd fight for it long as he could trip a trigger!"

Shannon nodded. He knocked the ashes from his cigar and smoked in silence for a moment. Then he said quietly, "Dan would've done just that, but he wouldn't have won. Shad Haggin is too big to be licked by range war, Jim. He'd bankrupt us."

"Us?"

"Yes—we're partners now," Shannon announced. "Dan didn't leave a will, but he told me a year ago that you'd inherit his half of Spur when he passed on."

That news astonished Jim Fayette. Even though there'd been a close bond between them, he'd never thought of being Dan's heir. . . .

Abruptly then he stepped over to the bureau, picked up his gunbelt and strapped it on. "Here," he said, "is the court Dan would've appealed to. I feel the same way."

"What you mean?" Shannon demanded.

"I mean to fight Bootjack—for as long as I can trip a trigger," Fayette said harshly.

He told Shannon then about Gus Odegarde's offer—about Doc Kellem, Alabam Bell and One-eyed Adair.

"But they're outlaws!" Shannon objected. "Scum of the Border!"

Fayette nodded. "The kind of scum we need to beat Bootjack."

"Not while I own half of Spur," Shannon declared stubbornly. "I'd rather lose every cow on our south range than turn Spur into a renegade's roost for Texas outlaws!"

Fayette eyed Shannon thoughtfully, knowing the old cowman wouldn't budge—that he'd stick to the law-court method of fighting Haggin no matter how long it took, or what it cost. Then he said, "I'll make you a proposition, Branch. You keep your half of Spur—the big half that you won't have to fight for. I'll take the Border Desert Ranch, to do with as I please."

Shannon demanded, "And what will you use for money?"

"I'll bring a beef herd through Haggin's blockade," Fayette said. "I'll sell what's left of it to buy bullets and pay fighting wages to my men. And I'll fight Bootjack from hell to breakfast!"

Shannon cursed, slammed his cigar into a cuspidor and said angrily, "You're talking like a gunslick renegade—like *Fanner* Fayette!"

"Yeah—and that's the way I'm going to fight," Jim told him.

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HE HADN'T heard Gail come into the room—didn't know she was standing there behind him until she exclaimed. "No, Jim—no!"

He turned, and seeing the expression in her startled eyes, felt apprehension sweep through him. Until this moment it hadn't occurred to him that he might lose Gail—that being faithful to Dobie Dan would cost him so high a forfeit.

"It's—it's something I've got to do," he said. "Dobie Dan wanted to stop Bootjack's range-grabbing scheme two years ago, when Haggin started pushing the little outfits off the Grant. But your father talked Dan out of it. Now Haggin is trying to block us off the Border Desert. If he gets away with that he'll start crowding Spur here in the north. Dobie Dan knew that and he intended to fight. He left me his share of Spur—and his share of the fighting."

"But Dan wouldn't have hired outlaws," Gail objected. She came close to Fayette and said softly, pleadingly, "Don't throw away the

things we talked about last night, Jim—all the plans we've made for the future."

As always, her nearness was like a compelling magnet to Jim Fayette. She was the shape and substance of his campfire dreams—the image of all that he desired.

"Dad's way will take longer," she said, "but it's the right way, Jim."

Lamplight brought out the gold flecks in her warm brown eyes; it put a sheen on her sorrel hair and gave her face a glowing loveliness. "Stay with Dad." she urged.

"And if I don't?"

That question seemed to startle her. It turned her lips grave and she said, "If you don't, you'll be throwing away everything we planned, Jim. Everything."

For a hushed moment indecision gripped Jim Fayette. He heard someone walking along the hall, and wondered idly who it was. Then he said flatly, "I'm sorry, Gail. I'm going to do it Dan's way."

At that moment Gus Odegarde eased through the doorway. "Suds says you wanted to see me," he said.

Fayette nodded, and Odegarde asked eagerly, "Is Spur going to fight Bootjack now?"

"No!" Branch Shannon exclaimed. "Beginning right now, Jim Fayette has no connection with Spur. I'm going to advertise that fact in the *Weekly Gazette* so there'll be no doubt in anyone's mind about it!"

"But I own the Border Desert Ranch," Fayette said quietly, "and that outfit is going to fight. I'm offering gun wages, payable when we bring a beef herd through Bootjack's blockade. Reckon your Hoodoo Hills bunch would be interested in riding for me, Gus?"

"Hell yes!" Odegarde declared, plainly pleased. "When do we start?"

A grim smile quirked Fayette's lips. "Right now," he said, and picking up his hat and riding jacket, followed Odegarde into the hallway without a backward glance.

TWO HOURS after Fayette and Odegarde left Reservation, they halted at a fork in the trail. The rain had ceased now, and a three-quarter moon shone intermittently through dispersing clouds.

Fayette scanned the muddy main trail which led due west to Haggin's headquarter's ranch; then gave his attention to the south fork. Both trails were hoof-pocked by recent travel. "Two men left the bunch here."

"They'd be headin' for Haggin's Calico Creek line camp," Odegarde muttered. "That used to be my place, Jim—before Bootjack pushed me off it."

"Let's have a look-see," Fayette suggested. "It's right on our way."

Later they halted again, on a wooded ridge above Calico Creek, and gave the line camp a close inspection. There was no light in the low-roofed cabin, nor any sign of life except for seven horses standing in a pole corral.

"Easy place to raid," Fayette reflected.

"Yeah," Odegarde agreed. "I found that out, two years ago."

A grin slanted across Fayette's face. He nodded at the corral and drawled, "Seems sort of cruel to keep broncs penned up thataway. Let's turn the poor critters loose, Gus, so's they can hunt some grass."

"Damn' good idea!" Odegarde agreed.

He took his gun from holster as they rode down the ridge and kept a close watch on the cabin doorway while Fayette walked his horse up to the corral gate and opened it. Then Fayette joined Odegarde behind the corral, waved his hat at the broncs and loosed a high rebel yell.

The spooked animals surged from the corral in a mud-splashing run. Fayette and Odegarde galloped back up the ridge, and when guns began blasting behind them, fired a few random shots at the cabin.

"A taste of their own medicine!" Odegarde blurted joyously, and wanted to increase the dosage.

But Fayette rode on across the ridge, saying, "No time for that now."

Afterward, when they'd cut the Spanish Grant Trail, Fayette pulled up and said, "Here's where we part company, Gus. You go tell Doc Kellem and the others what's in the wind. Tell 'em my fight against Bootjack will make the bob-wire war in Texas look like a Sunday-school barbecue."

Odegarde grinned. "You figger mebbe there's a chance to bust Bootjack complete—so's me and Charley and Tod Foyle can come back to our old spreads?"

"Sure," Fayette said confidently. "With Andy Kane and his crew at BD sticking by me we'll have a good chance."

"You reckon they'll all stick—now that BD ain't part of Spur no more?"

Fayette nodded. "They thought a lot of old Dobie Dan. Even if it can't be proved Haggin framed his killing, those BD boys will figger it was a Bootjack knife that did it, same as I do. They'll stick."

Odegarde turned his horse east, toward the Hoodoo Hills. "I'll talk it up good to Doc and the others," he promised. "We oughta have the chore well started by the time you join us, Jim."

"Bueno," Fayette said, and giving the lanky rider a farewell salute, sent his bronc southward on the wide trail he'd ridden so often with Dobie Dan Pardee—toward the fence they'd cut on their way north.

That fence, Fayette guessed, had probably been repaired. But it would be cut again,

many times. Only now old Dan wouldn't be here to help him do it. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell Hits the Owlhoot Trail!

THE BD headquarters was a typical desert spread. A long main building, built of 'dobe bricks, formed one side of a quadrangle whose other sides were made up of a bunkhouse, a blacksmith shop and a wagon shed. Beyond were the juniper post corrals and above all this a towering windmill clanked monotonously in the evening breeze. A weatherbeaten place, this Border Desert Ranch, bearing the hardscrabble look of all bachelor outfits; yet it was the nearest thing to home Jim Fayette had ever known.

Here, on the evening of the third day after leaving Reservation, Fayette talked to Andy Kane who'd been BD's wagon boss for ten years. They sat at Dan Pardee's spur-scarred desk in a room cluttered with the old guns and broken bridles and worn-out saddle gear that Dobie Dan had never got around to discarding. Briefly, Fayette told what had happened in Reservation, and what he proposed to do about it.

"You tell the boys at the bunkhouse that there won't be another payday until I sell some steers," he said finally.

Kane's knobby face bore a well-scrubbed brightness in the lamplight, and his sparse gray hair made a silver fringe around the bald dome of his head. He didn't speak for a long moment; then he drawled, "We should of put the boot to Shad Haggin a long time ago. Doin' it now won't bring Dan back—but mebbe it'll make him rest easier in his grave."

"Yeah," Fayette said grimly." "That's the way I figger it."

Half an hour later when he went over to the bunkhouse, the crew voiced the same opinion to a man.

"When do we start?" Tex Trebo demanded eagerly.

"Sunup tomorrow," Fayette said, a tough grin creasing his haggard face.

"Our job now is to gather a trail herd and do it fast," he said, handing Kane the list of riders he'd prepared. "This is how I want the work done."

The old wagon boss dug a pair of glasses from his shirt pocket and read off the names. "Shorty Smith go to Camp Number One and help Jake Foster and Bill Edwards work their steers to Soto Sink. Tex Trebo do the same thing at Camp Number Two with Bronson and Lane. Slim Goff, Jack Hyatt and Lee Terwilliger make the gather at Galleta Breaks."

There were more names on the list—fifteen in all. The names of men who'd ridden the Border Desert with Dobie Dan for a longer time than Fayette had known him; men who'd been proud to work for Spur. They wouldn't be working for Spur now, but they'd still be riding for Dan Pardee.

DURING the next ten days great plumes of dust spiraled across the Border Desert, where riders on sweat-lathered broncs hazed beef steers out of brush-tangled canyons, off wide mesas and down rocky ridges. There'd been no rain here for months and so the powdery dust made sun-sparkled banners against the cloudless sky—banners that could be seen and understood by distant watchers.

Far to the north and east, where the timbered hills marked the boundary of Bootjack Range, another group of hard-riding men also gathered beef steers. But there'd been rain aplenty here, and so no revealing dust rose above the tree-tops. On the night of the tenth day, at a hideout camp deep in the Hoodoo Hills, Jim Fayette held a council of war with the six men who'd hazed upwards of two hundred Bootjack steers into a box canyon.

"Andy Kane should be about ready to start north with his trail herd," Fayette said, warming his hands at the campfire. "That means we've got three-four more days."

Doc Kellem, a black-bearded giant of a man, said moodily, "I still don't think you'll get away with it, friend Jim. In order to throw this stolen stuff in with your beef herd we'll have to cross Apache Flats—and that can't be done in the dark of one night. If a single Bootjack rider sees that move they'll guess what you're up to, and your slaughter scheme will be busted wide open."

"It was a damn-fool scheme to start with," One-Eyed Adair complained. "How the hell you expect to run Bootjack's blockade when they can see you comin' for two days before you get there?"

"That," Fayette explained, "is part of the plan. They'll be laying for us in Spanish Canyon, which is the way Spur always went. They'll be expecting us to try it at night—and they won't be able to read brands before they start shooting. Also they won't know that only two hundred head are coming through the canyon, while the BD beef goes through the fence five miles east."

For a time then, while they absorbed this explanation, the men squatting around the campfire were silent. Alabam Bell, who'd ridden up and down both sides of the Border with a banjo stropped to his back, strummed out a few notes of *La Paloma.*

The soft, melancholy music reminded Fayette of the last time he'd heard Gail Shannon play the piano. Almost a year ago, it was, and about this same time of day—while the Chi-

nese cook at Spur washed supper dishes and Branch Shannon sat smoking with Dobie Dan on the front veranda. There'd been no real threat of impending range war then; no talk of trials, or Texas renegades. Gail had played *La Paloma* that night; she'd played *Black-Eyed Susie* and *Sweet Alice Ben Bolt,* and afterward there'd been a smile on her ripe lips when he kissed her. . . .

"Jim's scheme sounds all right to me," Gus Odegarde said presently. "I don't see nothin' wrong with it."

Charley Moss and Tod Foyle sat by themselves over to one side. They'd been law-abiding homesteaders until six months ago, and the rustler role was plainly distasteful to them.

Now Moss asked, "Like Doc pointed out, how we goin' to git this stolen stuff into the BD trail-herd without bein' seen?"

Doubt had been strong in these men for days. Even though they'd agreed to steal the steers needed for the blockade-running plan, they'd doubted its chances of success. And they still did. Even Gus Odegarde wasn't too confident; but because the need for vengeance was hot in him, the lanky rider was eager to try anything that might hold a chance to reclaim his homestead.

There were times when Jim Fayette had his doubts also; when the black boots of fatigue and lack of sleep tromped a bitter sense of futility into him. He'd been in saddle almost continuously for the past ten days and nights, and the strain of it was like a weighty burden on his shoulders. It was at times like these that he remembered the shocked expression in Gail's eyes when she'd said, "You'll be throwing away everything we planned, Jim. Everything!"

He built a cigarette and lit it with a burning twig from the embers. "There's a way to keep Bootjack from watching Apache Flats," he announced finally. "And it'll only take three men to do it."

"How?" Doc Kellem asked.

And then Jim Fayette revealed the part of his plan that would ignite the fuse of open range war—that would start the guns to blasting all across the hills and bring back the renegade brand of *Fanner* Fayette. . . .

IT WAS coming daylight when Fayette, Odegarde and Kellem halted their horses on the wooded ridge above Calico Creek. Night's dampness made a misty haze that half-hid the cabin, and beyond it, where the rain-swollen creek overflowed its banks, a solid shroud of fog cloaked the valley.

Fayette peered at the yard, seeing a chuck wagon near the cabin and the dim shapes of occupied bedrolls on the ground. "Just like I figgered," he said. "Haggin is all set to cover Spanish Canyon from both sides. There'll be another bunch camped at the old Chavez Corral west of the Grant Trail."

"Twelve bedrolls down there," Doc Kellem said. "Mebbe four-five more men bunked in the cabin."

Gus Odegarde, clumsily shaping a cigarette with cold-numbed fingers, said impatiently, "Let's start the music, Jim. It'll be full daylight in another ten minutes."

Even as Odegarde spoke a man crawled from beneath the chuck wagon and began building a fire.

"We'll spread out a little, and shoot wide to wake 'em up," Fayette announced. "I don't want anybody hit down there before they've had a chance to defend themselves."

"Bootjack wasn't that particular when they drove me out," Odegarde objected, pulling his Spencer carbine from its scabbard. "We could kill some of them sons before they get shut of their blankets."

"No!" Fayette snapped. "By grab, you'll do it my way, Gus, or you won't do it at all!"

Doc Kellem chuckled in his beard. "Fanner always was hell for fighting fair," he drawled reflectively. "Even in the old days, when they called him a killer."

"Fightin' fair won't git us nothin' when we're up against Shad Haggin's gunslick bunch," Odegarde complained. "Them galoots deserve guttin' with a dull knife, every damn' one of 'em!"

"Mebbeso," Fayette admitted. "But we're not shooting them while they're asleep, regardless."

They started spreading out then, and Fayette said, "Don't waste too much ammunition. We've got to keep that bunch busy all day."

Presently, when the horses had been tied well back in the timber, Fayette crouched behind a windfall at the rim of the ridge. This business was distasteful to him. But keeping Bootjack occupied here today would allow One-Eyed Adair and his three-man crew ample time to start the stolen steers across Mesquite Flats without being seen, and they should throw in with Kane's northbound herd before sunup tomorrow. After that Bootjack could look and be damned.

FAYETTE watched a man carry a bucket of water from the creek. He was tentatively centering the bucket in the sights of his Winchester when Doc Kellem's Henry rifle exploded farther along the ridge and water spurted from a hole in the bucket. Fayette grinned. Doc had always been plenty proud of his marksmanship. He had a right to be.

The cook dropped the bucket and raced toward the cabin with his shirt-tail whipping out behind him, yelling like a demon. Then, as both Odegarde and Holloway began slamming slugs into the chuck wagon, wild confusion

reigned briefly in the yard. Men scrambled frantically from bedrolls and rushed for cover, some barging into the cabin, others ducking behind it. Two riders, caught near the corral fence, hastily constructed a barricade of saddles from the kak pole.

Yet, despite the unexpectedness of this attack, Bootjack's gunhawks were forted up and firing three minutes after Doc's first bullet had ventilated the water bucket. That, Fayette reflected grimly, was as fast as a troop of well-trained cavalry could have done it.

For a time then, the continuous explosion of those massed guns rolled up the ridge like heavy thunder and searching slugs ripped the damp earth all along the rim. It was full daylight now, fog fading from the creek and the first flush of sunrise tinting the eastern sky. Fayette glanced over at Gus Odegarde, hunkered on his heels behind a huge boulder. The lanky rider was hastily shoving fresh shells into the carbine's loading gate; when he started firing again there was a savage, exultant expression on his long-jawed face.

There was a lull in the firing, and in the brief interval Fayette picked up a remote rumor of hoofbeats. The sound came from his left, where the ridge swung eastward in a wide arc north of the creek. For a moment, as Fayette scanned the timbered crest, he wondered what a rider would be doing out so early in the morning. Then abruptly he guessed the answer; that man had been standing guard and had failed to detect this attack until the firing started. Now, cut off from the camp, he was heading west—*to get reinforcements from Chavez Corral!*

The certainty of that sent Fayette backing away from the rim. If the Bootjack rider wasn't stopped, there'd be hell to pay here. Three men couldn't hold this ridge from both sides; with Haggin's gunhawks coming at them from all angles, the fight wouldn't last an hour.

Doc Kellem also heard the hoof-pound, for he called, "Somebody ridin' yonderly."

Fayette ran back to his bronc and climbed into saddle. "You two keep the camp entertained while I corral that loose rider," he ordered.

Then he listened for a moment, calculating the rider's exact location. There was, he estimated, a quarter of a mile between them. The Bootjack man was a trifle east—which meant there'd be a good chance to intercept him.

FAYETTE went down the west slope at a run. He crossed a three-mile clearing, rode into the timber beyond it and pulling up, kept a close watch on the open space north of him. The guns were going again over at the creek, their distance-muffled reports sounding like the rumble of far-off thunder. But it was quiet here; so still that the panting of his bronc and the slight jingle of a curb chain sounded loud. Moisture dripped from pine branches that made a solid shield against morning's faint sunlight, and the damp air here retained the night's coldness.

Waiting out a long five minutes without detecting sight nor sound of an oncoming horse, Fayette cursed. Perhaps he'd misjudged the angle of the Bootjack rider's travel, or else the man had changed course.

The vital need to locate that rider and stop him prodded Fayette like a nagging hand. If, by dint of fast riding, the Bootjack gunhawk had succeeded in crossing the meadow ahead of him, there was no time to lose. Each moment he waited here would widen the breach between them; unless he found the tracks within a matter of minutes there'd be no chance of catching up.

Impatience pulled at Fayette's fatigue-frayed nerves, but because he had a gambler's habit of relying on his judgment, he waited another long moment. He was rewarded by seeing the Bootjack rider start across the clearing directly toward him.

Fayette grinned in relief. He slid his Winchester into saddle-scabbard and drawing his sixgun, checked its loads. That yonder bronc was coming fast, being spurred unmercifully by a rider bent low in saddle.

When the rider was less than a hundred yards away, Fayette recognized the pock-marked face and slight form of Kid Carmody. And moments later, as the Kid came close, Fayette called sharply, "Reach, Carmody—reach high!"

Carmody yanked his horse back so hard that the animal slid on its haunches with front feet off the ground. In that fleeting moment, while the bronc's rearing body formed a broad shield, Kid Carmody's gun exploded.

The bullet smashed into Fayette's right thigh with an impact that knocked him sideways in the saddle. It made his first shot miss by a wide margin, and when Carmody's second slug creased the rump of Fayette's horse, the animal went into a wild tantrum of bucking.

The bronc's frenzied gyrations spoiled Fayett's aim as he tried to target Carmody, but it also saved him from slugs the Bootjack rider kept slamming at him. One of those bullets ripped bark from a tree so close to Fayette's face that slivers slashed his cheek; another cut a red rut across his horse's neck, taking a hank of hair with it.

Fayette gritted his teeth against the pain that stabbed his right leg with each jolting jump. Narrowly avoiding collision with trees, crashing through brush and windfalls, he fought the spooked bronc into submission.

Then, scanning the timber, he loosed a croaking curse. Kid Carmody was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blockade-Buster's Manhunt

IT DIDN'T occur to Jim Fayette that he'd missed death by a feather-fine margin here, nor that the bloody wound in his leg needed attention. All he thought about now was that he'd had Kid Carmody within easy shooting distance and had failed to stop him—that he'd bungled the one chore that might mean salvation for a blockaded beef herd.

Cursing himself for a fair-fighting fool, Fayette hunted until he found Carmody's tracks. His sweat-lathered bronc, winded by its long and violent pitching, was in no condition for fast riding. Carmody, Fayette guessed, had a reasonably fresh horse under him and at least a mile head-start. There wasn't a chance of overtaking him.

Yet, even then, with splinters of pain spiraling up from his wound and slogging sickness clutching at his stomach, Fayette didn't quit. There might be a bare possibility of keeping the Kid within rifle range—of getting a distance shot at him in the next clearing.

With that hope shaping a frail barrier against the dismal sense of futility in him, Fayette followed the fresh tracks westward, mile after mile. Doggedly, desperately—as he'd done so many times riding with the Wild Bunch in Texas—he kept his tired bronc at a run, slowing only often enough to conserve the ebbing reservoir of its endurance. He no longer felt the sharp splinters of pain in his wounded leg. Just a throbbing ache, and the warm wetness of blood that kept running down into his boot.

Crossing a dry wash that cut between two wooded hills, Fayette scanned the tracks here, noticing that they were so recently made that small particles of dust still sparkled in the sunlit air. And then he saw something else. There was a brownish smear on the sand; the telltale stain of blood!

Instantly then he knew that one of his shots had tallied. One of those hurried, half-aimed slugs had hit Carmody—or his horse.

There were more stains on the rocks beyond the wash.

Rushing his bronc up through the pines, Fayette scanned the timber ahead with the wariness of a questing hawk. The thought came to him that Carmody might fort up for an ambush—might try to get in another sneak shot like the one he'd triggered when his horse reared. But the thought of ambush didn't make Fayette to slow his pace; he rimmed the hill without halting and was halfway down the wooded west slope when he saw a meadow's gray-green sprawl below him.

It was only a glimpse through an opening in the timber, gained as his bronc slid down a steep bank. But in that moment two details of the scene registered sharply in Fayette's mind. There was grass in the meadow, and he'd seen cows down there. But the cows weren't grazing. They'd stood with heads held high—as if watching something!

That meant just one thing to Jim Fayette. Kid Carmody was close ahead, not more than a mile at most.

IT WAS a matter of minutes until Fayette reached the clearing and saw Kid Carmody halfway across the meadow. The Bootjack rider was frantically flogging his wounded bronc, and even as Fayette raised his rifle, the floundering brute went down in a sprawling, lifeless heap.

Fayette halted his horse. He saw Carmody crawl hastily behind his dead bronc, and caught the flash of sunlight on gun-metal. Fayette smiled thinly and taking deliberate aim, triggered two shots in fast succession. Carmody fired at almost the same instant, the flat report of his gun trailing the whine of a slug that was wide by several feet.

Fayette grinned and took stock of the situation. There was no need for hurry now. This meadow was at least five miles east of Spanish Canyon; six or seven miles from Chavez Corral. Unless the Bootjack bunch over there had riders cruising the hills, they wouldn't hear these shots. And even if they did, Carmody would be dead before they got here.

Leisurely, in the casual fashion of a man circling a spooky steer, Fayette rode a diagonal course across the meadow. The Kid fired again and again, but Fayette was a moving target and the distance was too great for accurate shooting. Only one of those slugs came close, and that one cut grass a yard behind Fayette's bronc.

Then, as Fayette neared a point that would put him in direct line with the bronc's carcass and thus deprive Carmody of his scant shelter, the Bootjack gunhawk jumped up with both hands held shoulder-high.

Fayette grinned again, and keeping a wary watch, rode slowly up to the Bootjack gunhawk. When he was close enough to watch Carmody's amber eyes, he called, "Shuck that gear, you stinkin' sneak!"

Kid Carmody obeyed at once, unbuckling his gunbelt and letting it drop to the ground. There was a sullen scowl on his pock-pitted face and a malignant glint in his shifty eyes. Though he went by the name of "Kid" he was well past thirty and there was an old, ingrained viciousness in him.

"You won't git away with that Calico Creek

job," he declared in a high-pitched, nasal voice. "You'll stretch rope for it—and so will your bushwhackin' partners."

"Mebbeso," Fayette grinned, and motioned for Carmody to precede him back across the meadow.

"You aimin' to make me walk it?" the Kid demanded.

Fayette nodded. "Git a move on, before I give you your needin's here and now," he growled, and leaned down to slide the Winchester into its boot.

He was like that, bent over with both hands busy, when the Kid slipped a knife from his sleeve, lunged and stabbed with the quickness of a striking snake.

FAYETTE had no chance to parry that thrust. Even as he snatched his sixgun from holster, the blade hit him in the chest with terrific force. He was aware of its point in his flesh at the same instant his gun exploded.

Carmody loosed a gusty grunt and when Fayette fired again, the Bootjack rider fell backward with a stare of bug-eyed astonishment in his eyes. Fayette watched him go down; he saw that the knife was no longer in Carmody's hand, and had the sickening sensation that the blade was still sticking in his chest. Then he looked—and saw something that made his astonished stare match the Kid's bug-eyed expression.

The knife was dangling, suspended by its point from the leather of his riding jacket!

Abruptly then Jim Fayette remembered the good luck charm he'd almost thrown away—the silver trinket he'd slipped into the pocket of this riding jacket.

Fayette disengaged the blade, seeing the blood on its sharp point and flinching at thought of what this knife would have done to him except for the protection of Pancho's "spashal charm."

He thought Carmody was dead, for both those slugs had hit the Kid in the chest, one of them cutting the corner of his shirt pocket. And Fayette was feeling a familiar nausea—the sickness he always felt after he'd killed a man.

He was turning his bronc to ride away when the Kid called whiningly, "Don't go—and leave me—to die alone."

Fayette dismounted, and taking his canteen from saddle, knelt beside Carmody. The Kid's eyes were glazing already and his face had the peculiar, waxy pallor of a dying man. He tried to take a drink, but he choked and the water was red with blood when it dribbled down his chin.

"This—this makes us even," he rasped, a crooked grin creasing his chalky, pock-pitted face. "I got Dobie Dan—and you got me."

The canteen slid from Fayette's fingers and for one tumultuous moment he had an overwhelming desire to clutch Carmody's throat—to choke the last breath of life out of him.

But he fought that desire down, and asked, "How'd Haggin know about the right-of-way deed?"

"You—stayin' with me, till I croak?" Carmody asked.

Fayette nodded, the strangeness of this bargain lost in the welter of hate that clutched him.

"Never did like to ride alone," Carmody mumbled and grinned grotesquely.

"How about the deed?" Fayette demanded. "How'd Haggin know Dan had it?"

"Sheriff Dawson—told him. Jube heard you talkin'—"

Blood rose in Carmody's throat then and he couldn't finish. But he'd said enough to make Jim Fayette remember the flimsy link that had evaded him in Reservation—the remote impression that had seemed vaguely significant that afternoon, when Sheriff Dawson had walked down the hotel hallway without making any noise. Dawson, he knew now, had been eavesdropping in the hallway when Dobie Dan talked about the title which Fonso Chavez had "ciphered out, purty as you please."

There was no pity in Jim Fayette's smoke-blue eyes as he watched blood slobber from Carmody's lips. The wounded renegade went into a long spasm of wheezy coughing. When it ended, Kid Carmody was dead. . . .

FOR seven hours, while occasional puffs of powdersmoke blossomed briefly on the rim of the ridge, Shad Haggin raged and roared in the Calico Creek cabin. He cursed Kid Carmody who'd failed to give warning of the dawn attack; he cursed Red Haggin for posting only one guard, and Breed Santana who'd reported at dusk last night that the BD beef herd was at least two days down the trail.

"Fayette probably pulled this same trick at Chavez Corral," Haggin fumed, "and shoved his herd through Spanish Canyon without a shot being fired."

Breed Santana turned from a loophole in the logs. "The beef ees not reached Mesquite Flats yet," he insisted. "Steers do not have the weengs—they do not fly."

"Then what in hell did Fayette pull this stunt for?" Haggin demanded, his hawk-beaked face black with anger.

Santana shrugged. *"Quien sabe?"* he murmured.

There were six other men in this smoke-filled room, and eight more behind the cabin. Three of them were bunked down with wounds and two were dead. But even then Bootjack had its attackers outnumbered by better than

five to one, and that fact was like a thorn in the thin skin of Shad Haggin's pride.

Haggin glared at his red-headed foreman with a malignant glint in his piercing, lidless eyes. "What kind of an outfit is this?" he snarled. "I been handing out high wages to you galoots for months—fighting wages. And when a fight comes I got no fighters. Just a bunch of gentle Annies!"

"If just one man could sneak back into the brush, he could circle around behind them polecats up there and break this thing loose," Haggin muttered.

Breed Santana stepped over to the table for fresh shells. "Ees not far to the brush," he announced, teeth flashing whitely in a grin. "But eet would be *jornada del muerte*—maybe."

"What the hell you mean, journey of death *mebbe?*" Red Bastable demanded. He pointed a thick finger toward a shapeless form out in the sunlit yard. "Slats Gregg tried it, didn't he? And him so thin he'd have to stand twice in the same place to cast a shadow. But they sliced him down deader'n hell and no mebbe about it!"

The scar-faced halfbreed shrugged. He reloaded his rifle with methodical skill and said, "Slats have bad luck because he run fast. Per'aps if he crawl slow, like lazy snake, he weel not have died—maybe."

Bastable snorted, but Shad Haggin asked, "Think you could reach the brush, Breed?"

"Quien sabe?" Santana mused. "Who can say? But I weel try—for one 'undred dollars."

Haggin seldom smiled, but his thin lips twisted into something very close to a smile now. "Go ahead, Breed—and good luck."

Santana held out a swarthy hand. "The dinero?" he suggested.

"What the hell, don't you trust Shad to pay off?" Bastable scoffed.

"Si," Santana said quietly. "I trust heem to pay now."

Haggin scowled, dug out his wallet and cautiously counted out the hundred dollars.

Santana pocketed the bills and went through the rear window. Bastable said slyly, "You'll be taking it back from his dead body, unless I miss my guess."

"Shouldn't be surprised," Haggin agreed, and watched Santana start crawling across the yard slowly—"like a lazy snake."

CHAPTER SIX

Killer in the Dark

IT WAS coming sundown when Jim Fayette got back to the ridge above Calico Creek. So weak from loss of blood that dismounting seemed like a tremendous chore, he tied his horse back in the trees and was limping toward the rim when he saw something that stopped him in his tracks. Breed Santana and Doc Kellem were hunkered behind the same rock outcrop—shoulder to shoulder!

For an instant Fayette thought his eyes had tricked him, that the pulsing pain in his wounded leg had affected his reason. But the next moment Gus Odegarde saw him and called amusedly, "We done got us another hired hand!"

That didn't make sense to Fayette either, until Gus explained how Santana had sneaked up here and was on the verge of shooting Kellem when he'd recognized Doc as an old friend.

Santana nodded agreement. *"Mucho amigo,"* he said, grinning.

Doc drawled, "Me and Breed rode together in Texas." Then the black-bearded outlaw glanced at Fayette's bloodsoaked leg and exclaimed, "Hell—you're bleedin' like a stuck hawg, friend Jim!"

Afterward, when Kellem had bandaged the wound and tied a tourniquet above it, he said, "That's just a temporary job, Jim. You'd better ride into town and see a sawbones."

"I'll ride into Reservation with a beef-herd," Fayette muttered stubbornly. "Not before."

During the next few hours news of the Calico Creek battle spread rapidly across the range. By midnight dead and wounded Bootjack riders had been brought to Reservation; Haggin gunhawks roamed the hills in quest of their attackers, and Sheriff Dawson tried to organize a posse to take the trail at daybreak.

"Jim Fayette has gone kill-crazy!" the big badge-toter declared. "Him and his Border riff-raff are fixin' to take over this whole range—and they'll do it, unless we help Shad Haggin fight 'em down!"

Wild stories ran rampant, the reports exaggerated with each telling. When the news reached Spur's headquarters, the Calico Creek fight had become a wholesale massacre, with Fayette's raiders numbering upwards of fifteen men who'd swooped down on the camp at daybreak and ruthlessly slaughtered sleeping Bootjack riders in their bedrolls.

"A ghastly thing," Branch Shannon muttered. "Fayette's reverted to his renegade ways with a vengeance."

"I—I can't believe it!" Gail exclaimed.

But there were tears in her eyes when she went to her room, and she couldn't forget the words Jim had used that last night in Reservation—"That's the way I'm going to fight. . . ."

ANOTHER dusk came—end of another day of tedious, pain-wracked riding for Jim Fayette.

Overtaking the herd of stolen Bootjack

steers the night before, he and his motley crew had driven the decoy herd across Mesquite Flats and joined Kane's northbound drive shortly before dawn this morning. All day, then, they'd relentlessly pushed the combined herd up the trail, keeping the Bootjack stuff in front and setting up a great banner of dust that could be seen for miles. Yet no attack had come, and that fact was proof to Fayette that Shad Haggin would set his trap in Spanish Canyon—and spring it tonight.

When the meal was finished, Jim Fayette gave Kane his final instructions, telling him to go through Hoot Owl Hollow and stay clear of the Grant Trail all the way to Reservation.

"You figgerin' to ketch up with us, before we git to town?" Kane asked, plainly worried now that the time had come to test Fayette's blockade-busting plan.

"Yeah," Fayette said. "But if I don't, you've got my bill of sale in your pocket. Take what you can get for the steers, give the crew fighting wages—and use what's left to fight Bootjack."

He climbed clumsily into saddle, suppressing a groan as the blood-gummed bandage pulled loose from his wound. Presently, as he rode out to the point of the decoy herd with Gus Odegarde, the melancholy music of Alabam Bell's banjo drifted across the dark. . . . *La Paloma's* haunting strains, soft and slow, like Gail had played it that night at Spur.

Finally Gus Odegarde called across to him, "Spanish Canyon just ahead."

Even that didn't entirely arouse Fayette from his deep well of weariness. But it stirred a thread of impatience in him—to get this grisly job over with. For even though his whole hope of breaking Bootjack's blockade hinged on this strategy, he hated the wanton slaughter it would bring.

He was thinking about that, and dreading it, when the first shot came. For a hushed instant its echo ran raggedly back between high walls. Then, as guns blasted on both sides of the pass, hell broke loose in Spanish Canyon.

"Keep 'em coming!" he yelled, his voice lost in the clatter of hoofs and horns as he lashed confused cattle forward with a rope-end.

On the opposite side of the trail, Gus Odegarde also swung his rope, and cursed the cattle in a croaking, dust-choked voice. Doc Kellem and Breed Santana were close up now, with Bell and Adair behind them, all desperately flanking the steers, relentlessly driving them to their doom. As prearranged, only Tod Foyle and Charley Moss were using their guns, to frighten the drag forward.

When dead steers had piled up so that their bodies built a barrier across the canyon, Fay-

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ette and Odegarde dropped back to new positions, riders retreating slowly all along the line.

The slaughter continued for what seemed an eternity to Jim Fayette—until at last he and his crew were fanned out behind the drag end of the herd. All but Doc Kellem, who'd died with a bullet between his eyes up there in the canyon.

A wounded steer charged blindly, its horn grazing Fayette's wounded leg. The pain of that impact turned him sick to his stomach, but it didn't spoil his aim, for he dropped the enraged brute just as it lunged into the scattering group of riders.

"Now," he said hoarsely, "we give them Bootjack sons some lead. Spread out and keep moving while you shoot!"

BREEZE-BLOWN streamers of dust rose above the cattle corrals at the south end of Reservation; they drifted across Main Street and settled finally against the barren slope of Cemetery Hill. There was an omen in the dust's journey, but Gail Shannon didn't see it. . . .

This was at noon, and Gail sat with her father on the Palace Hotel veranda listening to Jock Gilligan, who'd just come from the Blue Bull Saloon.

"Haggin is in there celebratin' with Bastable and Sheriff Dawson," the liveryman reported excitedly. "Shad says Fayette kept pushin' beef into Spanish Canyon last night like a madman; says there was only three-four Fayette riders left when him and Red came away from the canyon a little before daylight. I guess Jim is licked, Branch. Even if he got out of it alive, them Bootjack gunhawks will hunt him down. Shad told 'em not to come back without Fayette, dead or alive."

Shannon lit a fresh cigar, his fingers not quite steady. "Jim was doomed the day he decided to fight Bootjack," he muttered, plain regret in his voice. "I tried to tell him that, but Jim went loco."

Then Gail saw Jim Fayette—saw him come riding along the street like a slumped, saddle-beaten old man. "Jim!" she cried, rushing down the steps to meet him.

But Fayette didn't dismount, didn't seem to see her at all. There was no smile of recognition on his haggard, beard-stubbled face. He halted his sweat-stained bronc and peered at Jock Gilligan through bleak, red-rimmed eyes. He asked, "Any cattle buyers in town?"

Gilligan gulped. He nodded his head. "Couple over at the bank right now," he said.

"What you want with cattle buyers, Jim?" Shannon called.

Fayette jerked a thumb toward the cattle

pens at the south end of town. "Just drove five hundred head of BD steers into the corrals," he drawled. "They're a trifle shrunk up—but they'll make fair beef."

He rode over to the bank and dismounting stiffly, limped inside like a man not quite drunk, not quite sober.

"You reckon he's gone plumb crazy?" Gilligan demanded, staring at Shannon. "Haggin said—"

Then they heard it. A familiar, plaintive sound that was unmistakable to any man, woman or child in the cow-country. The bawling of corraled cattle!

"By grab!" Gilligan blurted.

Gail exclaimed, "He's done it, Dad! He's brought a beef herd through, just like he said he would!"

But Branch Shannon wasn't listening. He was watching three men cross Main Street—seeing Shad Haggin, Red Bastable and Sheriff Dawson tromp toward the bank with guns in their hands. Bastable and Dawson took up positions on either side of the bank doorway, while Haggin waited on the sidewalk.

THE bank teller stared at Jim Fayette as if he was seeing a ghost. He blurted, "But I thought—"

"Ain't asking what you thought," Fayette said roughly. "Where the buyers at?"

"Over to the Chink's, eating," the teller said.

Fayette limped back to the doorway and was stepping through it when he heard Gail Shannon's panic-stricken voice lance across the street: "Jim—go back!"

At that instant, as Fayette faced Shad Haggin, he saw the other two—and knowing why Gail had tried to warn him, knew also that her warning was too late.

"Grab, you smart-alecky son!" Haggin snarled. "Before I give it to you cold-turkey!"

Forcing a calm confidence into his voice, Fayette drawled: "You're outnumbered, Haggin."

Astonishment bugged Haggin's eyes. "What the hell you mean, outnumbered?" he demanded.

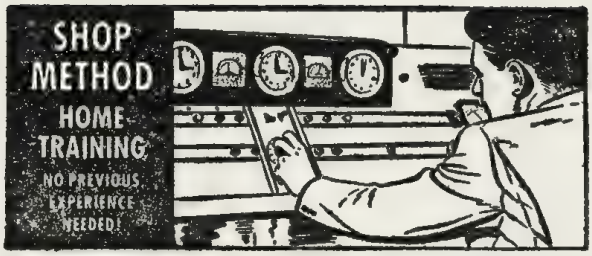
"We got you three to one, ain't we?" Sheriff Dawson sneered.

"Sure," Fayette admitted, a thin, sardonic grin twisting his bloodless lips. "But the whole BD crew is down at the stock pens right now—and a few besides. Men like Alabam Bell and One-Eyed Adair and Gus Odegarde."

Then he said, "Listen, Haggin. Listen to them beef steers bawlin'."

"Hell—we butchered all your beef in Spanish Canyon last night!" Red Bastable scoffed.

"You butchered two hundred head of cat-



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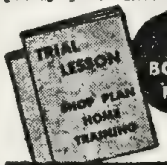

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tle," Fayette said quietly, not shifting his gaze from Haggin. "But they weren't mine."

"Then whose in hell were they?"

"Yours," Fayette drawled, a ghost of his old devil-be-damned grin creasing his gaunt face. "My herd came up through Hoot Owl Hollow while your butcher boys were slaughtering Bootjack stuff, rustled out of the Hoodoo Hills the day we kept you corraled at Calico Creek."

The astounding realization that this was true—that he'd been tricked into the very trap he'd set—struck Shad Haggin with an impact that shook him visibly. In this moment of monstrous rage and consternation his glance turned to Red Bastable and he snarled accusingly, "You stinking, witless fool!"

IT WAS the chance Jim Fayette had hoped for: not a chance for survival—but time enough to pay one last instalment for Dan Pardee. Marshaling all the skill the renegade years had given him. Fayette drew and fired with such incredible speed that the blast of his gun punctuated Haggin's words like a roaring exclamation point.

In that split-second he remembered Kid Carmody's confession—and choosing his target without hesitation, slammed a slug into Sheriff Dawson's spongy face.

The lawdog fired at the same instant, his bullet striking Fayette with a force that seemed to tear his right arm from its socket.

The rest of it was a smoke-hazed hell of pain and dazed confusion to Jim Fayette. He knew his gun was gone and because the muscles of his back flinched against the expected smash of Bastable's bullet, he forced himself to whirl around.

He failed to see Bastable. But he was aware of excited voices behind him—heard Gail cry gladly, "Jim—oh, Jim!"

And he saw Branch Shannon step up to the sidewalk with a gun in his hand. That seemed strange to Fayette—downright queer. What would a peace-loving law-court cowman be doing with a gun? Then he discovered Red Bastable's sprawled body on the bloodstained boards and knew abruptly why Red hadn't shot him in the back.

Shannon said, "I was wrong, Jim. There was only one way to beat Bootjack—the way you and Dobie Dan tried to tell me."

That didn't seem real either. And when Gail came rushing up and put her arms around him, Fayette thought he was having some sort of delirious dream.

But then she kissed him, and the kiss was real. . . .

THE END

NO LAW WEST OF FUNERAL BEND

(Continued from page 75)

with a short, sucking sound that might have come from a smooth stick suddenly pulled out of soft mud.

"Mother!" screamed the girl, leaping forward to catch her and ease her down as she fell.

A dying Indian out there in the bushes—his death-song whispering faintly on his lips—had summoned the last of his strength to send his last arrow into flight. It had driven into the woman, ripped through her, the steel head sold by some unscrupulous trader splitting her heart.

Roderick Bellarkin was trembling from head to foot when he climbed into the rear end of his wagon with a lantern in his hand and let down a canvas flap behind him.

Mr. Roderick Bellarkin had made up his mind. He was going to kill a man.

He reached inside a trunk and took out a long, silver-mounted Colt. He was slipping it into his waistband when a low chuckle sounded behind him. Wheeling on his knees, he saw Lige Pedley.

"This is a heap yonder better," whispered the Missourian. In his extended hand was a sheathed knife with a ten-inch blade.

BELLARKIN came sneaking up, Lige Pedley behind him like a shadow, in one of the wildest bursts of firing. Jackson was here, there, everywhere, trying to make men keep down and fighting on the move himself all the time.

Chances to drive that long knife into Jackson's back were twice almost within Roderick Bellarkin's reach. Each time he hesitated a second too long.

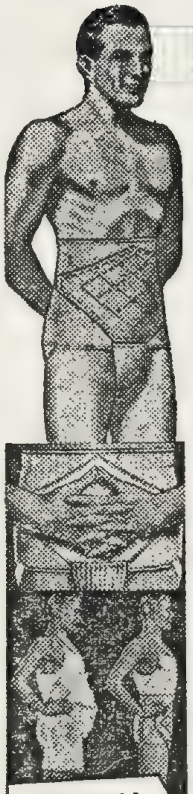
"Next time," Bellarkin hissed, almost frantic now as Lige Pedley eased up beside him.

Another charge was soon coming. The Indians were like so many panic-stricken sheep.

Without having any willing part in it Lige Pedley made him hesitate the third time. As the Indians swirled in close, there was a sound slightly above the noise of the firing and pounding pony hoofs that was like a single harsh thump of a finger on a dry gourd.

Pedley grunted, flinched as if trying to jerk to his feet, then slid back, a round hole almost in the center of his forehead spilling sudden blood where a bullet had caught him. It scared Bellarkin. Wide-eyed, he turned and started to creep away. A low, jarring whisper stopped him.

"I been awatchin yuh, mister." The cold, round right eye of old Anvil Brandon was looking at him now. "In Shilo, 'twas, I got



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my eye shot out by a young plug of a recruit who thought he'd kill me in the thick of it 'cause I was first sergeant an' had bossed 'im around a little too hard, he figured. Yuh figure to kill Race an' blame it on the reds. That's natural. Two men can play the same game. Me an' you have it fairly alone right here. Stop! Turn an' look me in the eye! This is where the hair burns."

BELLARKIN stopped, looked, mouth open to say something. The cold, round muzzle of a big Colt stared back at him. Beyond the weapon and the hand holding it the one eye glittered, hard as a button cut from an oyster shell. Right in the midst of another wild burst of firing the Colt jumped. A second later, gumming a little chew of tobacco, old Anvil Brandon was moving away, his face as emotionless as the rocks all around him. Mr. Roderick Bellarkin—of *the* Bellarkins—was not going to bother anybody any more.

Jesse Jones, a youth of seventeen, had been sent out two nights before to try to get through the red lines. With three arrows in him, Jesse had made it to the Big Horn, almost crawling half the way. He was dying, blood on his lips, when they picked him up at the edge of the army camp, but he had lived long enough to tell his tale, and the troops had pulled out thirty hours after the youth had left the wagon train.

Jackson was one of the last to hear the story. He was there on the line with Parson Joe Goodnight, listening to Parson Joe praying after the fighting was over and the last redskin in the trap had been wiped out.

The parson was hard hit. He had lost his little Andy. In the last burst of the fighting here he had lost his Young Joe. A bullet had caught the youth through the heart. Not yet did the preacher know that his wife was dead, killed beside the wagon in the dark.

Once back at the wagon train, there was no need for words between Race Jackson and Henrietta. She was there to lend a hand and help her father out of the saddle. Parson Joe immediately seated himself against the bole of a big cottonwood on the west side of a long, deep grave they were already shoveling out of the hard earth. He did not seem to hear them when they told him his wife was dead.

The girl was in Jackson's arms at once. It made no difference who was staring. Goodnight sat motionlessly, the New Testament on his lap. He looked as if he were only waiting for something.

For a time after that the crowd had somebody else to stare at. It was a handsome, white-faced young lieutenant going from wagon to

wagon. He stared at every woman and girl, looking keenly into their faces. He looked at the dead as they were brought in.

Anna Price had come up, driving her late grandfather's wagon. At the sight of the lieutenant and the sound of his yell she pulled up. In a second she had dropped the lines, leaped down over the wheel, and was rushing forward to throw herself into his arms.

"I wondered if that wasn't him," whispered Jackson. "Anna told me about him. Her grandfather was bringing her out here to marry him. I'm glad. He looks clean-cut, and I believe she's one of the finest girls I have ever known. Please try to stop crying, dear."

SHE had somehow managed it by the time they were ready for the funeral. Parson Joe seemed to have been saving himself for this. He had asked for a sip of water only a couple of times. When it came time to rise Jackson and the girl helped him to his feet. He stiffened his legs, shoulders to the bole of the tree. Whiter and whiter had grown his hands and face, and yet his voice was steady when the girl held the New Testament for him and he slowly started in.

"On your heads," he told them toward the end, "I ask His mighty blessings!"

"Look!" whispered a youth beyond the grave as he started to slip slowly downward with Jackson and the girl grabbing him. "There's a great big smear of blood on his vest. Look! It's on his lips now!"

"Parson," cried Jackson, "you're shot!"

"Yes, I know." Goodnight smiled up at him and his daughter. "I got a ball in the stomach in the charge before Young Joe died.

"Jackson," his voice grew stronger, "you've got my girl. My wagons and all the rest of my worldly belongings go with her. My wagons are not like Mr. Bellarkin's—God, please rest his soul! Yesterday I learned that they're filled with whisky. He aimed to start a saloon on the Big Horn. Not a bank, though I didn't tell my wife. Take my wagons and my girl. I know no one I'd rather leave them with. You'll be good to her, I know. There's just one thing more." Jackson had to lean close to catch that. "Just as I am, please lay me down between my little Andy and my Joe."

He sighed. It was the end. A great groan lifted from the crowd. A mob came hurrying around the grave to lift the body tenderly from the ground. Jackson took the girl back into his arms. The ever-understanding Anna Price came from somewhere, her brother and the lieutenant following. She put her arms around them. Out of such men, such women, the West was being born.

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